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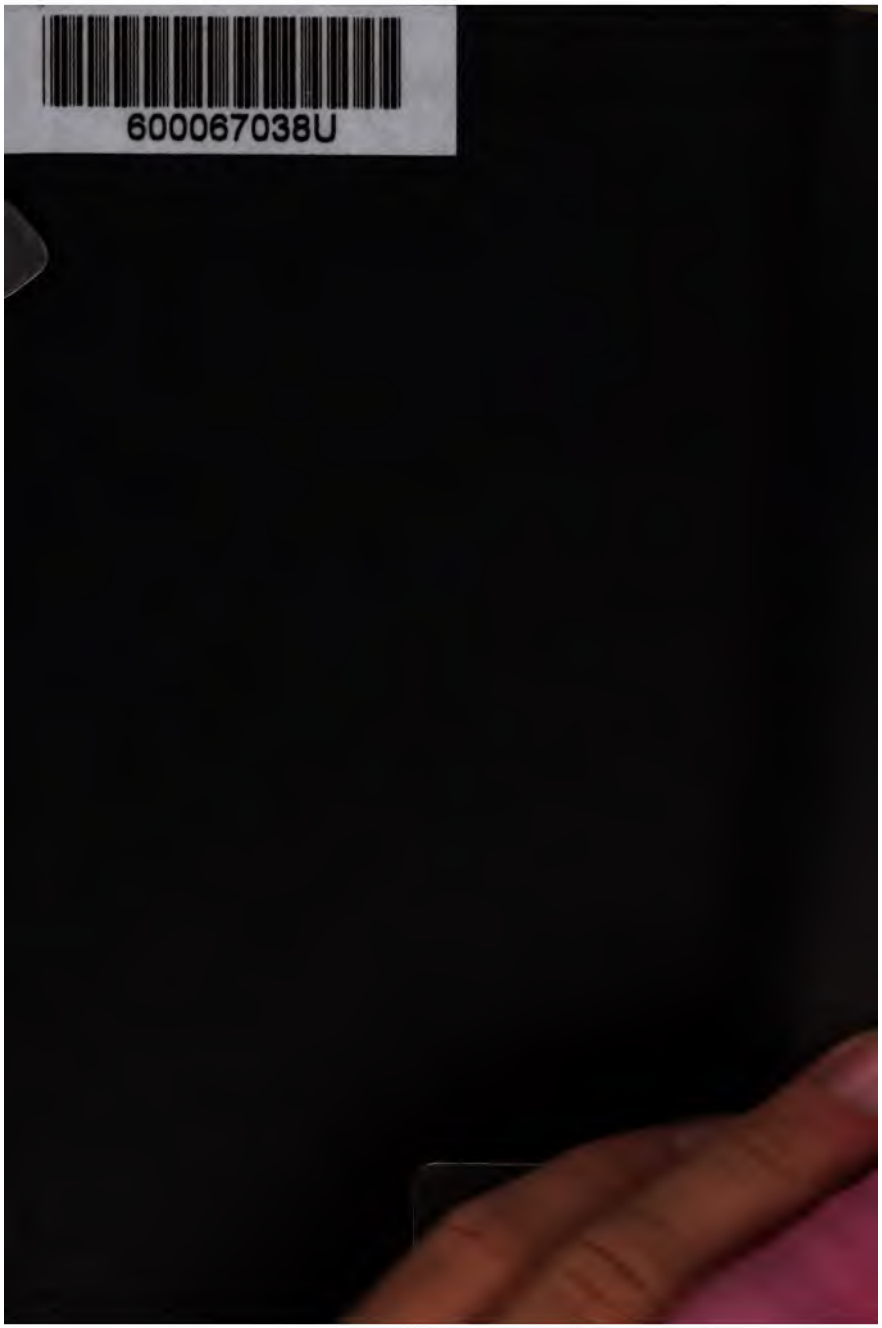

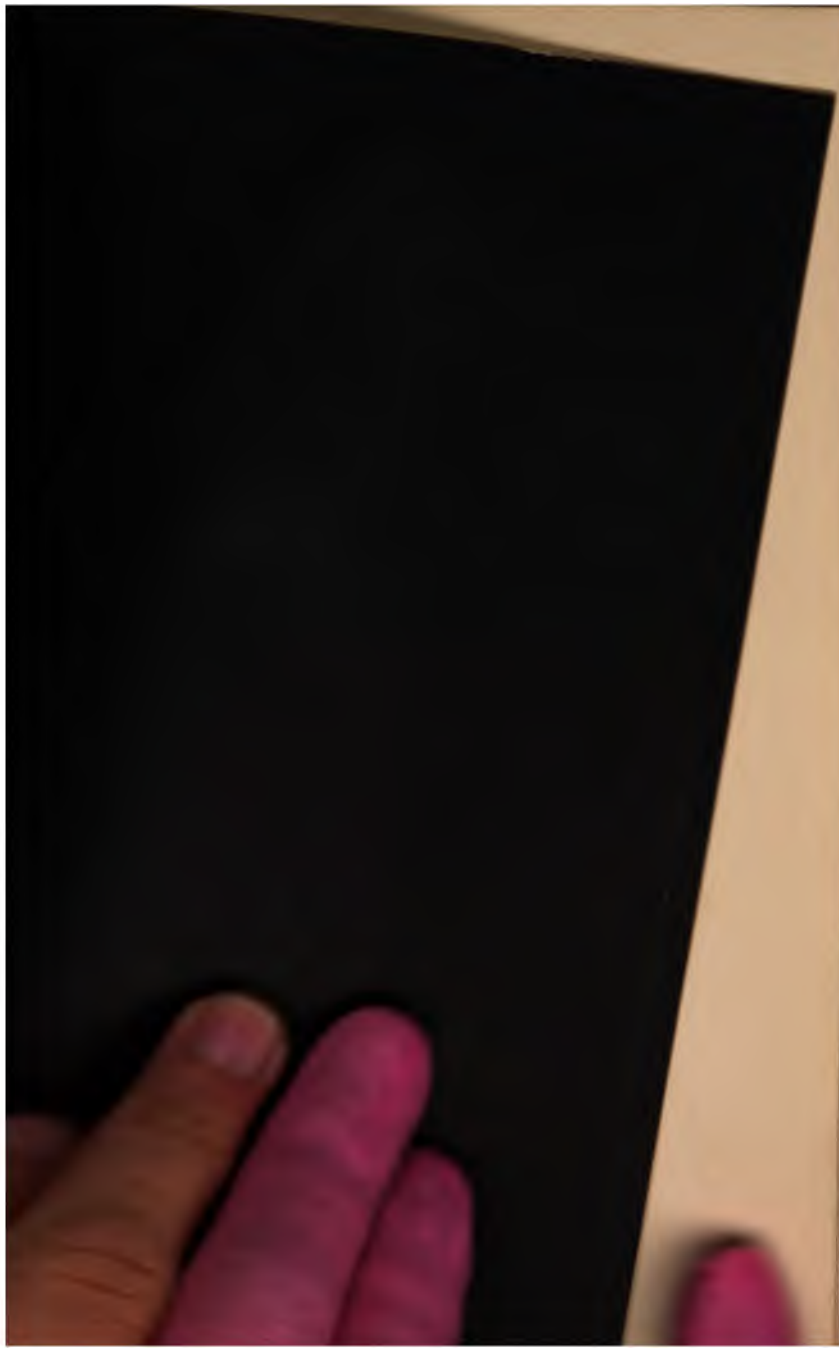

LOYAL HEARTS.

A Novel.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

BY

DOROTHEA M. CORBOULD.

"Once more he sees his rose love,
Still she is dancing gay;
He is worn and faded,
Loyal and still for aye."
"LITTLE TIN SOLDIER."

VOL. III.

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LOYAL HEARTS.

CHAPTER I.

ARLINA RILETTO.

Evening in Venice. Already the soft gray twilight had waned, and the young May moon was beginning to shed forth her silvery rays upon all around, lighting up the dome of St. Mark's, and the stately buildings on the Grand Canal, making the smaller canals look like threads of silver, winding in and out beneath the dark gloomy walls of the houses. Above, the firmament glowed with living sapphires—

> Hesperus, that led
> The starry host, rode brightest—
> Ah! sweet the coming on
> Of grateful evening mild; then silent night
> With this her solemn bird, and this fair moon,
> And these the gems of heaven, her starry train.

Silence was gradually stealing over all, broken

only by the soft music from some shadowy-looking gondola, stealing along like a gloomy phantom from under the archways, or the voices of the boatmen calling in warning to each other, as now and then they met in some narrow part of the canal.

Round the steps of the opera house several gondolas were collected, setting down in turn their freight, while the light streamed forth in all its brilliancy, making the murky shadows look more murky still by contrast with the dazzling interior.

"Ah! there he is! See Carlina!" exclaimed a soft voice in Italian, as its owner indicated with her fan a gentleman who stood near them on the steps of the vestibule. "Now, is he not handsome?"

"Hush. Marie! he will hear you. He is English I am sure. He has the look of one of those proud milords one sees sometimes in Venice. Yes, he is handsome — like the statue of the Apollo Belvedere in Rome. But where is Roderigo?"

"I do not know, he was here just now. Oh, Carlina, he is coming this way. Is he not lovely?"

"You seem to be smitten, Marie. I shall begin to think you are sentimentally inclined after all," laughing. "See, there is Roderigo. Let us be going in, the overture will be over."

The two ladies passed on, and joined the crowd of elegantly attired women and their attendant cavaliers, who were making their way into the theatre, for to-night an entirely new opera was to be produced for the first time, and all the nobility and wealth of Venice had assembled to witness its success or failure. Of the latter there could scarcely be any chance with such singers as were taking the principal parts. The prima donna was a certain Madame Arlina Riletto, who, but a few months before, had taken Venice by storm with her beautiful voice, her sweet pathetic face, and her graceful figure. An Italian by birth, she had, it was said, married an Englishman of noble family and great wealth, but, becoming tired of each other, they had parted by mutual consent, and she had taken to the stage, for which she had always shown a decided penchant, and where her voice and appearance had secured for her at once a prominent place among the favourite artistes of

the day. Of her private life little was known, few having an entrée into the pretty villa so snugly enclosed among its sheltering trees, where, with only a few old servants, she passed her days in peaceful retirement, wandering in her garden beneath the shady trees, and attending to her birds and flowers—rarely leaving her snug retreat except to fulfil her engagements at the theatre, and then always accompanied by a grim-looking woman of middle-age, who watched over her mistress with the fidelity of some faithful animal.

The overture was nearly over when Bertie Macgregor at last made his way to his seat. Many bright eyes rested with marked favour upon the good-looking young Englishman, whose aristocratic bearing and unusual height made him the more conspicuous. His face had still the look of weariness and care-worn indifference, which, since the event of a few months ago, had settled upon it. His blue eyes had lost their old quizzical look, and his mouth was stern and set under the drooping moustache. He took his seat with a careless scrutiny of his surroundings, wholly unconscious of the notice he was exciting among the fair occu-

pants of the "loggie" and "seggi del palcone." Then, as the curtain drew up, he settled himself comfortably, took out his opera glasses, and prepared to enjoy the coming treat. Always an enthusiastic lover of music, he had found it of late the only soother of his inward troubles and perplexities, and often as he gazed from the window of his apartments high up in one of the crowded streets of Venice, upon the still calm night, the soft notes of a guitar played in some distant gondola would come like a strain of heavenly music to quiet the turmoil of his troubled spirit, and lead his thoughts away from the miserable present to brighter hopes and aspirations.

To-night he had gone as usual to the opera, the only recreation he allowed himself from his somewhat arduous duties. Here he could sit and fancy himself once again Bertie Macgregor, of the Highlanders; the petted, flattered darling of the beautiful queens of London society, who had delighted to do him honour, and reckon him among their most favoured cavaliers; instead of being what he was—an outcast from the world, a lonely wanderer in a foreign land.

He had found Sir Arthur Dashwood, the British Consul, a stern, reserved man, holding but little intercourse with the world beyond what his office demanded, and his secretary soon found that the surest way of gaining a passport to his favour was to do what was required of him with as little explanation as possible, and to avoid all unnecessary speech with his silent employer.

"I beg your pardon, may I pass you?"

Macgregor took down his opera glasses with a start, as the voice addressed him in English.

Turning round he encountered the Grayling schoolmaster. With a grave inclination of the head he rose and made way for him, but without taking any further notice, and Robertson passed to the seat but one next him with a frown of mortified pride.

At this moment a tremendous burst of applause rose in the theatre as the prima donna for the first time made her appearance—a *petite*, graceful figure, clad in the rich dress of a Venetian lady of the olden time, sparkling with jewels which covered the slender throat and bare white arms. But it was her face which struck Bertie Macgregor the

most, so fair and childish, with large mournful brown eyes like a deer, and a tremulous baby mouth—a face to haunt one like the memory of a sweet but sorrowful dream, and linger in one's heart long after the possessor of it shall have passed from our sight for ever.

She paused a moment to bow her acknowledgment of the plaudits which greeted her, then began to sing, and from the moment when the first sweet notes of her superb voice fell upon his ear, Bertie sat and watched, and listened, amazed and entranced. Never had Arlina Riletto sung as she sang that night, when, for the last time, she charmed the ears of the highest and noblest of the great ones of Venice, and brought them, by the charm of her wonderful acting and exquisite voice, in humblest adoring homage to her feet. Never had she displayed so much tenderness, such sweet pathos and womanly dignity of manner, or looked so lovely ; and when the curtain fell at last upon the final scene of all, the whole house roused itself with one consent in uproarious applause. "Brava! Bravissima ! exqusite ! splendid ! encore ! encore !" resounded on all sides, and the great actress was

called before the curtain again and again, while bouquets were showered upon her in wild profusion, covering the boards of the stage, and alighting in dangerous proximity to the footlights. Gracefully the homage was acknowledged by the little figure in its glimmering white satin robes, sweetly smiled the lips that had had the power to call forth this flattering tribute of approval; but Bertie Macgregor, watching her intently, had seen her cheek pale and her lips quiver, as the flowers fell around her, and had wondered, that of all the splendid bonquets, she had deigned to notice but one, a little careless bunch of blue violets, which she stooped to pick up, and held against her heart as she once more bowed, and the curtain fell.

Getting out of the theatre this evening seemed an impossibility. Bertie almost laughed as he found himself tightly wedged in between a fat couple, who seemed as if they would have to remain hours before space enough could be cleared to allow of their safe egress. His lips curled involuntarily, and then he became conscious of a pair of laughing eyes fixed upon his face. Their owner, a young and remarkably handsome woman,

leaned against a corner of the balustrade, and appeared wholly impervious to the crush around her. She lowered her eyes directly Macgregor looked at her, but the smile upon her lip remained there still.

"I have seen her somewhere before. Where could it have been?" thought Bertie to himself; but at this moment a severe dig in the ribs from the fat gentleman recalled his wandering mind to the present, and involuntarily he pushed onwards with the crowd. Suddenly a hand grasped his arm tightly, a voice said faintly—

"Help me, for the love of Heaven! I am dying!" and he felt some one press heavily against him.

It was Robertson, white and ghastly, looking to Macgregor's horrified eyes, like one at the very point of death.

"Hold up a moment," he returned quickly, "see here is the balustrade; lay hold of that, and in a minute they will give us room."

He half led, half dragged, the fainting man to the sides, and supported him with his arm.

"Do you feel better?" he asked kindly, as the

crowd became less, and the air from the open doors blew in fresh and cool.

"Yes, thanks. I felt giddy and faint. I thought I must have dropped when I caught hold of you. I ask your pardon for doing so," half drawing away.

"Nonsense, my dear fellow, I'm not a brute. You'd have been trampled to death in two minutes if you had fallen"—

"Will the signor have my vinaigrette," came a soft, sweet voice, and again Macgregor encountered the glance of the dark smiling eyes.

"I thank the signorina, but I am quite well again now," answered Robertson in Italian, and Macgregor wondered how a village schoolmaster, even though an educated man, should be able to speak with so pure an accent.

"You had better have it," the lady replied, and, as Robertson again shook his head with a murmured vote of thanks, she pressed a jewelled vinaigrette into Bertie's hand, then turned, and was gone.

"Do you think you can manage to get home?" Macgregor asked, as he led his companion out on

to the steps, where several gondolas were still waiting.

"Yes, thanks. I am very grateful," humbly.

"Say no more about it—it was nothing worth gratitude. Good-night."

Once at home, Bertie bethought him of the vinaigrette which he had slipped into his pocket. He took it out and looked at it. On the top, surmounted by a crown in diamonds, were the initials, "M.C.P."

"What am I to do with it?" he said, laying it down upon the table. "I can't return it, when I don't know who she is, or where to send it."

Upon the steps of the Palazzo Portici stood the fair daughter of its princely owner.

"Ah, Carlina mia! he is handsome!" then in a lower tone to herself, "and I shall see him again, for my vinaigrette always brings me luck."

"Silly child!" retorted her sister, laughing. "Any one would think to hear you talk that you had never seen an Englishman in your life! Come, it is late, let us go in—I am in no mood for star-gazing, if you are. There is nothing so tiring as the opera," with a half-suppressed yawn.

Marie di Portici turned and went indoors, a sigh escaping her lips.

"Carlina thinks nobody of any consequence but that stupid Roderigo of hers," she said to herself, as she went upstairs.

CHAPTER II.

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

MADAME RILETTO stood at the window of her pretty salon, absently watching the gambols of two little white Maltese terriers upon the lawn below.

She looked pale and haggard in the dazzling light of the morning sunshine, and there was a tired, spiritless expression on the pretty face, which told of late hours and want of sleep.

She turned her head at the sound of the opening door, and a slight smile curled her lip, as her grim-looking attendant entered, her hands full of flowers.

"More bouquets, Deborah?" Madame Riletto said, in English, "they seem to have no idea beyond floral offerings in this country. But how beautiful they are!" taking a huge cluster of gloire-de-dijon roses into her hands, and lifting it to her face.

"Yes, yes, ma'am, they be bonnie enough to be

sure, but eh it's waste o' money, I'm thinking, an' what 'll we do wi all these others, 'a thruteh-in'' up th' place?" glancing contemptuously at the table where bouquets of every description, large and small, tasteful and otherwise, took up every available space.

"Some of them must go away—the scent of the gardenias and jasmine will make me faint in a little while," her mistress replied.

"Aye, but 'tis a waste!" ejaculated Deborah, as she began to gather the splendid bouquets into her apron with indiscriminating alacrity. "Why couldn't they ha' left em to grow, 'stead o' pulling em up wholesale, I wonder?"

"Stop, Deborah, not that one—leave it where it is!" cried Madame Riletto, eagerly springing forward, as the maid laid her hand upon a small bouquet of Neapolitan violets, with the evident intention of adding it to the already heaped-up contents of her apron.

Deborah looked at her mistress in some surprise.

"Eh, Miss Lucille! but ye wouldna surely be thrawin' away all these bonnie roses an' such like

an' keepin' they poor bits o' common wilets!" contemptuously.

Deborah was a Lancashire woman, with all the brusque "out-spokenness" of the natives of the "North countrie," and also their contempt for anything growing wild in their own woods and fells.

"They are not common violets—people in England prize this sort very much," Madame Riletto observed gently, as she moved the vase in which they stood farther away from Deborah's insatiable clutches. "Leave them where they are, and I think you have taken away enough now. Tell Bathilde I will have them put on the table in the dining-room."

Deborah left the salon, with her floral burden, decidedly "put out." Her mistress sighed.

"Poor Deborah! now she is offended—and she is so good to me, coming all the way here on purpose to be with me, and persisting in remaining, although she hates Italy 'like poison,' as she says. But I could not let her take away those. I wonder where he is, and when he will come to me—it seems so long since he went away,

that day when I said I was tired of being near him, and hearing of his evil doings. I never thought he would really have gone, and now, perhaps, he will not know where I am, and never find me"—a little sob interrupted her. "Yet he must want to see me by sending the old signal—sweet messengers!" she raised the violets and kissed them. "Now can I"—

"A gentleman for the Signora," said a voice at the door—not the voice of Deborah, but of a much younger, and most prepossessing-looking Italian girl. Her mistress started.

"Show him here—or stay"—she considered a moment, while the maid waited, her hand upon the door—"Yes, I will see him here."

"I knew he would come," she exclaimed, as she glanced at her fair reflection in a mirror opposite her. "The violets told me true!"

Once again the door opened, and a man entered the room—a man of noble stature and lordly mien, upon whose dark handsome face sternness and love unutterable struggled wildly for the mastery, a man whose whole countenance bore witness of the passion and remorse of a lifetime—

Robertson, the village schoolmaster of Grayling! He advanced a few steps, as the door closed behind him, then stood still, his arms folded on his breast, his eyes fixed upon Arlina Riletto—but he spoke not a word.

One wild cry she gave at sight of him, then sinking down upon a couch near her, covered her pale face and frightened eyes with her trembling hands. Thus, after long years, they met—the injured husband, the guilty wife: they who had sworn before God's altar to love each other and be faithful till death did them part.

There was a long and awful silence. *He* was thinking how dearly he loved her still—how great had been the effort last night, when he had seen her for the first time after so long, clad in her shimmering satin robes, the pride and favourite of the throng around her, to keep himself from crying out her name in accents of loving, agonized entreaty. How lovely she was! so little changed from the sweet girl-wife whom he had wooed and won beside the sparkling waters of the Cumberland lake, near which stood the stately home which called him master. He had not seen that

home since *she* left it—he would never see it again!

He recalled (as he had recalled it so very often before), the days long ago, when she had first come, the orphan daughter of an old friend of his mother's, to live at Garthwaite—how bright and pretty she was, inheriting all her Italian mother's vivacity of manner, and her exquisite voice: a voice which stirred within him all that was noble and tender in his nature. He remembered how she had always seemed to prefer his society to that of his half-brother, Lewis Rolton (Robertson shuddered, as he always did at the name of his rival), and how when he had won her for his wife, she had told him repeatedly of her love for himself alone!

Alas! that love was of short duration—scarce three years, three happy, blissful years, had passed over them in their peaceful country home, among the moors and fells, where the heather-covered mountains rose to the blue sky, and the lake rippled and sparkled at their feet, when the storm suddenly burst, and he awoke to find himself alone—forsaken, duped, and dishonoured.

His face grew whiter, and the love died out of his eyes, as he looked upon the crouching form of his wife. Still he spoke no word.

And *she?* Who can paint *her* thoughts, in the horror and dismay of this unexpected meeting? She had thought it was Lewis—he always threw her violets; and though they had parted in anger, she felt sure he would come back to her again, as he had so often done before, to beg her forgiveness for his long absence. Why did he not come now? Why had he left her to this?

She took her hands from her face and looked at the still form of her husband.

"Why are you here?" she said, faintly.

Robertson started, and came a step nearer. Madame Riletto saw the action, and cowered down farther upon the couch, holding out her hands as though to ward him off.

"Go!" she cried. "You have no right to be here—this is my house! I"—

"Do not fear, I shall not intrude upon you long," he began, in a hard, cold voice. "I only wanted to look upon your false, deceitful face once again, and tell you the evil you have wrought

upon me and that other, your"—he checked himself.

His wife sprang to her feet—

"You—you have seen Lewis?" she gasped.

"Yes; I have seen him."

"And he is here, then?" quickly

"No," sternly, "he is not here."

She would have asked, "where, then?" but something in Robertson's face stayed the question. She stood looking at him as if fascinated, while he went on in cold, distant tones—

"He told me when I saw him that you had left him—left him as you left *me*. He would have told me worse, had I not refused to hear; but I could not bear"—he stopped. "Lucille, has no thought of remorse ever stirred your heart when you thought of what *I* must have suffered?"

His voice was changed now from its hard, cold tone to one of tender reproach. His wife hid her face again, but she did not speak.

"And I thought you loved me, Lucille. I was fool enough to listen to all your fond words and empty protests. I believed you to be as pure and innocent as a child. My God! how basely

was I deceived! When by the lake shore we wandered side by side, you often told me you had never loved any one but myself; that I was the first who had taught you what true happiness meant; and I, in my fool's paradise, believed you. Then came the sad awakening. Ah! Lucille you little knew how narrow was your escape from the avenging hand of your injured husband. You little knew how short would have been your guilty happiness, had it not been that Providence saw fit to strike me down, and deprive me for a time of reason. When at last I recovered, I said to myself, 'Not now—let them be. Some-day, when he little thinks it, I shall be avenged!'"

He came towards her, and almost hissed the words into her ear.

"Do not fear, Lucille," as she recoiled from him, with a cry of terror, "I would not harm *you*. My reckoning was with *him*, the destroyer of my peace, the wolf who stole my one ewe lamb, and with him my account is settled."

He paused, and folding his arms, again regarded his frightened companion with a stern, relentless look, terrible in its calm intensity.

Madame Riletto clasped her hands together, and tried to speak, but no words came from her white lips.

"I resolved to come here and find you," went on Robertson, after a pause. "*He* told me where you were, and that you had gone on the stage—a meet ending to such a career as yours," with a sarcastic laugh. "'Perhaps,' I said to myself, 'he has lied, and she may be still willing to let the past be forgotten, and take the pardon which her husband offers her.' Lucille, leave your present life. Forget what has been, and come back to me."

He came to her side, holding out his arms with a look upon his face which made it beautiful. Then she spoke—

"Where have you left him? What have you done with him?"

Robertson started, his mind going back to the dark, lonely road, the stormy sky, and his victim writhing beneath his touch, when he put the same question which his wife now asked.

"I—I do not know," he said. "Lucille, come back with me!—come back to the home I have

never seen, except in my dreams, since you left it seven long years ago! My darling, come! And oh, Lucille, try and love me again!"

His voice had sunk to a passionate whisper, but she seemed not to hear the words he spoke.

"Where is Lewis? You say you have seen him, and yet you will not tell me when or where. Oh, Gilbert, if you have any pity left, tell me where he is!"

"Do you, then, love him still?" came the cold, stern reply.

Lucille started, her pale face flushing.

"He—he left me in anger," she said, evasively. "I said I should go, if he did not leave off gambling, and then he was angry, and went away. I have never seen him since. Last night I had these violets" (touching them gently as they stood before her on the table), "and I thought he sent them as a token he had come back. He always threw them to me when I sang"—with a little sob.

Robertson gave vent to a muttered imprecation; then, before his wife was aware of his intention, he had caught up the bouquet, vase and all, and

hurled it through the window on to the stone terrace beneath.

"*I* threw you them," he said, curtly. "I fancied they would remind you of the time when I used to gather them for you in the spring evenings at Garthwaite. Had I known they would only recall to you visions of the present, I would have trampled them under foot sooner than let you have them."

"And had I known from whom they came, *I* would have trampled them under foot, and in the presence of the whole opera-house, last night," she retorted, stung to sudden passion by his words.

His face grew whiter; a look of despair crept into his dark, angry eyes.

"It is enough," he said. "You have finished the work you began. May God forgive you for the ruin you have worked in one who but for *you* might have ended his days in peace! In the future, when you are old and lonely, with no one near to lean upon, no hand to smooth the wrinkles upon your brow, no loving heart to whisper in your ear sweet memories of bygone days, then you

will perhaps think of me, and wish you had listened to my last appeal, for, Lucille, we part never to meet again in this world."

He turned towards the door, but she made a step towards him, and called his name.

"Gilbert"—then he came quickly back, a look of eager surprise crossing his face—"you—you frightened me just now. Where is Lewis?"

His brow darkened.

"Still harping upon that scoundrel? Not one thought for *me*, whom you have wronged? But in return for your welcome, your evident pleasure at seeing me"—sarcastically—"I will tell you where he is." He paused; she listened breathlessly, her large soft eyes opened wide, her hands clasped together. "He is lying at this present moment beneath the earth which he so long polluted by his presence, numbered among the dead, whose deeds will be tried by a higher power than that of earth. He has gone to meet that God whom he set at nought, and who allowed vengeance to fall on him in the very midst of his evil career."

Robertson did not wait to see the effect of his words. His wife stretched out her arms towards

him with a faint cry; then tottered forward, and as the door closed behind his retreating form, sank in a senseless heap upon the ground.

Before night all Venice was ringing with the news that the great prima donna of the Royal Italian Opera was dead. A friend had called to see her in the morning, bringing bad news from England, so it was said, and the shock had caused the bursting of a blood-vessel, which in a few hours terminated the life of the most brilliant actress, and sweetest singer Venice had ever known. Much commiseration was felt for her untimely end, and many conjectures were made as to the cause of the catastrophe, some alleging that Madame Riletto had heard of the death of her husband in England, others that she had become unexpectedly aware of his marriage to a former rival, but at the real truth none ever guessed, and only the father confessor, who had been hastily summoned to administer the last holy rites of the Church, was at all aware of the real cause of her death. With him, of course, the secret was one only to be divulged to those, for whom he held it in trust to deliver as a message from the dead.

CHAPTER III.

A TANGLED SKEIN.

SAUNTERING towards the Piazza S. Marco, reading as he went the closely-written pages of a letter in his hand, was Bertie Macgregor. So absorbed was he, that he had more than once run up against a chance passer-by, whose scowling look of disapproval quickly changed to a smile, and murmured, "Non merita la pena, signor," as the kindly blue eyes of the young Englishman fell upon him, and he heard the courteous words of apology which accompanied the look.

In vain did the fair occupants of the windows seek to obtain the passing notice of the handsome stranger; in vain did Marie di Portici come out upon the balcony of the Palazzo and call to the doves which flew about over her head—Macgregor never even saw her, though he passed so close to her that by stooping she could have touched him; in vain did the sellers of fruit and flowers accost him with their whining pleadings to buy their

tempting stores; in vain did the importunate beggars, still to be found in Venice, lift up their voices in piteous and incessant appeals for charity—he heeded them not. His heart was back again at Grayling; his ears heard only the voices of those near and dear to him. He saw in his mind's eye a beautiful haughty face framed by a wealth of golden hair, a face which he would never see again perhaps till time had robbed it of its fair loveliness and dimmed the azure eyes, but which came ever before his mind in contrast with the dark-eyed daughters of the sunny South to the latter's great and lasting detriment. Even the laughing eyes of Marie di Portici had failed to stir within him one spark of feeling, or cause him to bestow another thought upon their fair possessor.

Turning a sharp corner of the street, Macgregor came suddenly in violent contact with a gentleman who was advancing in an opposite direction. Both drew up hastily with a murmured apology; then simultaneously uttered an exclamation of surprise and pleasure.

"Goldie!"

"Macgregor!"

"Hush! not so loud, my dear fellow; my name is Trehern now," said Bertie, hastily, as the two men shook hands after the hearty manner of Englishmen who have not met for some time. "You are the very last person I should have expected to see."

"And I might return the compliment with more reason, perhaps, since I did not know you had left England, whereas this is almost my home. If it is not an impertinent question, what in the name of wonder are you doing in this part of the universe?"

"Well, at present I am getting an honest living as secretary to the Consul," replied Macgregor, and his voice had a ring of bitterness in it, not unnoticed by his friend.

"Sir Arthur Dashwood? I know him slightly. Crusty old beggar, isn't he?"

Bertie shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, he's not particularly talkative, I must confess. For the rest, he is not a bad sort of fellow. We get on fairly well together on the whole."

"Then you have left the army?"

Macgregor looked up quickly.

"Yes, of course. I could not do otherwise after that affair of the murder. By-the-bye, Goldie, I forgot, in the pleasure of seeing you, that you might not perhaps care to know me now. I am still under a cloud, but"—

"My dear Macgregor, don't say a word about that. I only wish I had half as clear a conscience as I am sure *you* have. But one can't talk here. Will you come and spend a quiet evening with me to-night? My rooms are close by the Corte d'Apello."

"I should like it above all things," Macgregor replied, warmly. "I get awfully lonely at times and it will be a relief to let out some of one's pent-up feelings in good old English phraseology. I'm sick of having to jabber Italian, and never was much of a hand at it either"—with a laugh.

"Very well, then; I shall look for you at about 7.30. By-the-bye, were you at the opera last night? They say Arlina Riletto is dead—died last evening."

"You don't say so!" Macgregor replied in a

shocked tone. "Why, she was acting the night before. I was at the Opera."

"So was I. Wonder I didn't see you. Hullo, Father Clement! whither away in so much haste?"

The priest, who was hurrying by, his eyes fixed thoughtfully upon the ground, pulled up sharply.

"Ah, Mr. Goldie, this is an unexpected pleasure. You are the very man I wanted to see. When did you return?"

"About a week ago. But let me introduce to you my friend Cap—Mr. Trehern."

"I have had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Trehern once before, and am glad to renew our short acquaintance," Father Clement said, smiling all over his fat, good-tempered face.

"And I too," Bertie replied, cordially.

"I have been in Naples since we met," Father Clement said, addressing Macgregor, "or I should have called upon you—the sight of a fellow-countryman is sometimes acceptable in a foreign land."

"I shall be very glad to see you whenever you can spare the time; I am always at home before eleven, and after five," Bertie said, and then with

a parting word of reminder from Mr. Goldie as to the hour he should expect him that evening, he bade farewell to him and the priest, and went on his way.

"So you have met Mac—my friend, before," said Goldie, as he and Father Clement walked on together.

"Yes—we crossed from Dover to Calais in the same boat—a nice young fellow, I took a great fancy to him."

"Did you? We are old college chums, and he used to be my fag at Eton when we were boys together. I always found him the most kind-hearted, honourable fellow that ever breathed, and I can't think what the dev—I beg pardon, Father, —what the deuce they meant by suspecting him of mur"—

Here Mr. Goldie suddenly paused, he had never meant to let out his friend's secret to anyone, least of all to a stranger.

Father Clement smiled to himself.

"So I was right," he thought, "and he is the man after all; well, well, we shall see what will come of it." Aloud he said, "your friend's

face seems familiar to me, I have often wondered whether it is possible I can have seen him before."

"It is very likely. Trehern has been all over the world in his time, but," suddenly changing the subject, "you wanted to see me, you said."

"Yes, are you going home?"

"Well, I can't say that I was, but I will do so if you wish it."

"It would be better not to say what I have to say in quite so public a place. The walls have ears, you know."

"Then we will take a gondola and go at once. You can tell me going along."

"It is about Lewis Rolton," began Father Clement, when he and Goldie were at last seated in the latter's luxurious apartments. "I thought it better not to say anything before the Gondolier, those fellows pick up a good deal of English sometimes, and one cannot be too careful."

"Have you found him?" said Goldie, sharply.

"No. And I don't believe we ever shall now."

"Why not?"

"Well, that is what I wanted to say to you. Yesterday afternoon I was called to the dying bed of Madame Riletto, the great opera singer. You know she is dead?"

Ralph nodded his head.

"She made a strange communication to me." The priest paused, lifted the glass of claret which stood near him on the table to his lips, set it down again and continued. "She told me that yesterday morning her husband had suddenly appeared at the villa where she lives, after a separation of seven years, and had told her Rolton was dead."

"*Dead?*" echoed Goldie, starting from his seat.

"Dead. She moreover acquainted me with the fact that she had run away from her husband with this very Rolton, and that in consequence, the former had vowed vengeance on them both. This vengeance he gave her to understand at their interview yesterday, he had already wreaked upon Rolton—how, she did not know, but he was dead, and her husband had killed him—this much he told her. She begged me with her dying breath to find her husband and deliver him up to justice as the murderer of Rolton, and I promised to do

it, with the aid of others. As a priest of the Church I cannot act myself, but *you* can do it."

"*I?*" Goldie said, in a bewildered voice.

"Yes, you. This man must be in Venice; you can go to the police and describe him, according to my directions. It will be but part of your vow."

There was more than mere request in the Jesuit's tones, there was command; evidently Goldie recognized it, for he said meekly—

"Very well, Father, but how can I describe him when I have never set eyes on him!"

"There I can help you. Madame Riletto said his name was Gresham, Gilbert Gresham; that he was tall and dark, with a face like a Spaniard, and that he stooped a little when he walked."

"Rather a vague description, in a place where all the men are dark, and not a few may stoop a little," said Goldie, laughing.

"That was what his wife told me. I don't know the man myself, therefore can give you no better description."

Father Clement's tones were rather nettled, and he sipped his claret sulkily.

"I'll tell you what, I'll get Mac—Trehern to

help me. He takes more notice of people than I do, or used to do when we were at college together; he would remember any face he had seen for months after, and always recognized anybody he had once met."

"This Gresham may have left Venice; in which case it will be as well to put the matter into the hands of the secret inquiry, and in the meantime we must keep our eyes open. As I tell you, I cannot act myself, for if we priests were supposed to make public use of what we hear in the confessional, we should get very few penitents, and the Holy Church would suffer in consequence."

Father Clement rose as he spoke, and took up his hat to depart.

"I have your promise to aid me in this matter, then?" he asked.

"Certainly, Trehern is coming to see me this evening, and we can talk it over."

"And if you will kindly give me pen and ink I will write a brief description of Gresham, which you can give to the prefect of police; perhaps it would be as well to mention the matter to the consul, and have all English passports examined."

"That *they* will do of course," Goldie replied, he did not quite like being ordered about as though he were a public messenger.

"Well you had better ask them at any rate, it will not do to let the man get off scot free. It does very well in England, but not here," significantly.

"I shouldn't advise you to let many Englishmen hear you say that, Father, or even your cloth wouldn't save you."

"Well, look at that murder case last year, Macgregor ought to have been hanged, yet they let him off."

"If you knew Macgregor you wouldn't say so. He is as likely to have committed that murder as the man in the moon, just about as likely, and I'd swear his innocence before anyone's."

"Well! well! don't get angry, Mr. Goldie—I only gave my opinion—I was not aware that you were so staunch an upholder of Macgregor's, or I should not have spoken. Good-bye."

"I have made two discoveries this morning," Father Clement muttered to himself, as he leaned back beneath the awning of the gondola and closed

his eyes, "one is, that Trehern is Macgregor, and the other is, that Ralph Goldie will not be long one of *us*, even to redeem his vow."

When Bertie Macgregor reached his friend's rooms that evening he found him pacing up and down in a state of great excitement.

"Macgregor, I have heard news of Rolton," Goldie began, when they had finished their repast, and were smoking their cigars on the wide balcony which overlooked the Rialto and the Grand Canal, flanked on each side by gorgeous palaces, churches, and spires; a fairy scene in the soft moonlight.

"Yes?" interrogatively, "where is he?"

Bertie asked the question absently—he was listening intently to the sweet strains of a well-known operatic air, wafted upwards from the prow of a passing gondola—

Di pescatore ignobile,

sang the rich tenor voice of the Barcarole, it reminded Macgregor of the time when he had sung it at Lady Denison's "at Home," with the blue eyes of his love fixed upon him, her sweet voice murmuring thanks in his ear.

"He is dead."

"*Dead?*" Macgregor withdrew his eyes from their contemplation of the scene before him, and looked with a half-dazed expression at his friend. "Who says so?"

Ralph Goldie repeated the story Father Clement had told him, adding that in his (Goldie's) opinion they might as well look for a needle in a bundle of hay as try to find Gresham in Venice, with nothing to go by, but the description the priest had given, and which might apply to every other individual they met.

"What the dickens could such a pretty woman have seen in that conceited ass, Rolton," said Bertie, thoughtfully, when Goldie had finished.

"Women are fools—at least most of them," Goldie replied, correcting himself.

"It will be an awkward business, by Jove. Fancy going up to a man and saying, 'You must come with me, old fellow, for you have murdered somebody ——,' why one of these peppery Italians would run one through the body in no time."

"Yes," said Goldie, "and how on earth is one to know this Gresham isn't a secret society spy,

and wont stiletto us both. It was bad enough when I was dodging Lewis Rolton all over the Continent, never knowing whether if I found him, he mightn't make an end of me on the spot."

"This fellow Gresham must have something of the Englishman about him, his speech will betray him, even though his looks do not," Bertie remarked, musingly. "But why can't Father Clement do his dirty work himself?"

Ralph rolled up a cigarette between his fingers with the minutest care.

"Father Clement, like all those Jesuits, thinks he has only to command to be obeyed, besides, in the days of my youth, when I had an inkling towards the Church of Rome, I took an insane vow to aid the brotherhood to the best of my power in any secret commission which they might have in hand. This discovery of Lewis Rolton was one of these enterprises; the finding of his murderer will be the other."

"Well, I will do my best to aid you, of course. I come across queer characters sometimes in my wanderings—who knows but I may come across *him?*—it would be rather a lark to run him to

earth, when he least expects it. I wonder where he murdered that poor devil—though he did cost me five hundred, I feel awfully sorry for him."

"Who? For Rolton? My dear Macgregor, he was not worth pity. A rogue and a cheat, and a regular cad into the bargain. Gresham is the one to be sorry for, in *my* opinion."

"What sort of a fellow is Father Clement?" Bertie asked abruptly.

"Not a bad sort. Very good-natured and immensely fond of a joke; but an awful bigot."

"That is in his favour; shows him a good Churchman. He is coming to see me. I think I shall tell him who I am, I don't care about appearing under false colours," Bertie said, reddening a little.

"Well it was a near shave I didn't let it out to him this morning. He has taken a great fancy to you, but between us two, old fellow, I should not tell him if I were you. He is desperately hard upon you as it is, with regard to the murder—thinks you ought to have been hanged."

Goldie spoke lightly and unthinkingly, little

guessing how his words stabbed his companion. Macgregor sighed.

"Well, I suppose it will be always the way with me through life. Every one I meet will scout me when they hear my story, and turn from me in horror and disgust. However, all the same, I shall tell Father Clement."

"You will be a fool if you do," Goldie said, emphatically.

"I think not," was the quiet reply.

CHAPTER IV.

"I AM THAT MAN."

THE search for Gilbert Gresham proved unsuccessful; no clue as to his present whereabouts could be discovered, and at last Ralph Goldie set off himself to London, to place the matter in the hands of the police authorities at Scotland Yard, who immediately despatched detectives to Cumberland to search for intelligence from the relatives (if there were any living) of Gresham, and to discover some clue to the mystery.

Bertie Macgregor meanwhile kept his eyes open in Venice, in case any person answering to the description of the murderer of Rolton should cross his path, but the days passed away without his encountering any such individual, and by degrees the remembrance of his self-imposed duty became less and less distinct.

If only the murderer of John Raynor could be discovered, he had often thought to himself in

the first days of seeking for Gresham, what a load would be lifted from his life! But he had given up all hope by this time; it was not likely that the murderer would come forward, now that the affair had ceased to be a nine days wonder. Bertie would often sigh for the days which were past, before the darkness came, and no ray of light seemed able to pierce its gloom. How long would it be, he wondered, before he could grasp the idea of his present life, as a veritable fate, which there was no resisting?

About a fortnight after Macgregor's chance meeting with Father Clement, the latter paid his promised visit, and Bertie hastened to put into practice his intention of acquainting the priest with his past history, as connected with the murder of John Raynor.

Father Clement was unusually cordial in his greeting of his "young friend," as he called him, his round, rosy face literally beamed again with affability, and Bertie thought, as he looked at him, how terribly difficult it would be to tell him all.

"Help yourself to claret, Father; it is warm

to-day, and you have come out in the very worst part of it for comfort. The sun seems to blaze down upon one's head with almost tropical intensity; I never felt it more in India."

"Thanks. You have travelled a good deal, I think you told me?"

Father Clement poured himself out a glass of wine, looking keenly over the top of his spectacles at Macgregor, whose unusual nervousness of manner had not escaped his penetration.

"Yes, a good deal."

"Our friend Goldie seems to be a bird of passage, too—never content to remain in one place. But you have been a soldier, I think you said?"

Macgregor started, and looked at the priest; the latter, however, was holding his glass up to the light, seemingly absorbed in the contemplation of the rich ruby tint of its contents.

"I did not say so, Father Clement; but, nevertheless, you are right, I have been a soldier," Bertie replied, quietly.

"Ah, I thought you said so; or it may have been a certain military look about you which sug-

gested the idea to me. What rank, may I ask, did you hold, Mr. Trehern?"

"Captain," Macgregor replied, briefly; but the keen eyes of the Jesuit noticed his look of disquietude, and the impatient tattoo his fingers were beating upon the table.

Father Clement sipped his claret, and set the glass down again with a smack of his lips.

"It always seems to me such a pity," he began, slowly, "when a man leaves the army after having once entered it. No profession is more noble and glorious, except that of the Church, in *my* humble opinion."

"And yet I chose my present life in preference to it," Macgregor said, half to himself.

"You left, then, of your own free will?"

Bertie looked straight at his questioner, a gleam of anger in his eyes.

"What should lead you to think I have not done so, Father Clement?" he asked, coldly.

"My dear sir, don't be angry! I did not mean to insinuate the remotest possibility of your having done otherwise than as your free will dictated. The question was, perhaps, an imper-

tinent one on my part. I beg your pardon. I was only following out the train of thought, consequent upon the idea which struck me, of the strangeness of a young fellow like you, who has 'soldier' written in every feature of his face, every movement of his limbs, choosing to forsake such a profession for the monotony of a sedentary life. Let us change the subject. Have you heard any news of our friend?"

"Goldie? No; but, Father Clement, before we change the subject I want to confide in you."

"Ah!" Father Clement said, interrogatively, his eyes twinkling with some hidden thought which came no farther than the surface. "Is it anything in which our Holy Church can help you, my son?"

"I am not going to confess to you, if you mean that, Father. I am a Protestant, you know," Macgregor said, quietly. "I only wanted to tell you the story of a part of my life, in order that you may no longer see me under false colours. You remember the Grayling murder?"

Father Clement nodded.

"You remember also that I told you I was a friend of the murdered man?"

Again the priest made a gesture of assent.

"But I did not tell you that I was Macgregor himself—the man who was accused of the murder of his friend."

Bertie spoke the words slowly; watching as he did so the effect of them upon his companion. But Father Clement neither started nor exclaimed; he twirled his empty wine glass absently round and round, and replied calmly—

"No, you did not tell me that."

"And now that I *have* told you, you will, doubtless, despise and shun me as others do. Nevertheless, in spite of the probability of such a result, I could not reconcile it to my conscience to appear before you under false colours. I heard what you said about me that day on the 'Calais Douvres.' I know very well what is your opinion as to my guilt, and the fate which I deserved, and no doubt the circumstances of the case were much against me; but, Father Clement, look at me closely, and tell me if you think I have the appearance of a man who has taken the life of a fellow creature."

Macgregor raised his head, and fixed his clear blue eyes full upon the face of the priest. The latter studied the handsome aristocratic face for some minutes without speaking. Then he said—

"My son, it is true that when I uttered the words which you overheard, I fully believed in your guilt, and I would have moved heaven and earth to bring you to justice, had it been in my power; but when I looked at your face, and heard you speak, my opinions underwent a complete revulsion, and I feel sure you are as innocent as *I* am of the charge against you."

"But—but—you didn't know who I was?" Bertie gasped, in astonishment.

"I guessed it. Your face was familiar to me. I discovered one or two little things which supplied the missing links in my memory, and I have been, as it were, waiting for you to tell me this—for I felt sure you were too honourable to keep me in ignorance of the truth. We priests of the Church, Captain Macgregor, learn to read the hearts of our fellow men more quickly than you would imagine. I am glad to think I was not mistaken in you after all."

"Was that why you asked me if I had been a soldier?" Macgregor said, a sudden light dawning upon him.

"Yes. I wanted to lead you on to telling me all—to pave the way for you, in fact. When you were angry with me for appearing to doubt your having left the regiment, I feared you were going to let the opportunity slip of confiding in me."

"Well, you see, I did not know that you had any inkling of how matters were; and, therefore, your question savoured strongly of suspicion. I have never done anything I am ashamed of yet; the backing a bill for that poor fellow Rolton was about the stupidest act of my life, but that was done out of mistaken kindness, because I pitied the poor wretch so. I can't bear, however, to have any one think I was turned out of the army, when I left it solely because I did not think it wise to let the presence among its officers, of a man who had been tried for murder, sully the good and honourable name of those who have served in it. That was the reason I sold out."

"And I think you were right, in one way.

There would always have been a degree of unpleasantness in mixing with your brother officers, especially with those who from pure conviction, or an innate love of differing from their fellows, might let you discover, in your intercourse with them, that they *tolerated* you only because they could, with decency, do nothing else."

"Yes, that is just what I felt," Macgregor replied, musingly. "Several of the fellows wanted me to remain, and I might have been tempted to do so, simply because I knew and felt that they regarded me as

More sinned against, than sinning,

but for this reason—that there were amongst them men who, for the mere fact I had once stood before a judge and jury as a prisoner, would have scorned to own that they served in the same regiment."

Macgregor spoke bitterly. The remembrance of certain remarks he had heard, from those who called themselves his friends, always caused him a pang of mortification and injured pride.

"And are you content, my son, in the new life

which you have undertaken?" asked Father Clement, with another of those keen, penetrating looks, which made him a dreaded inquisitor in matters of the Church to which he belonged.

"Yes," with a sigh, "I am content."

"That is well. My advice to you is to wait and hope. Things may turn out well after all. Did you belong to our Holy Church, I might offer you better and safer consolation; but with your religious views, I have no intention of meddling. My advice is given, therefore, merely as a friend."

"And a most true and valued one," Bertie said, as he warmly grasped the priest's outstretched hand. "Father Clement, if all your brotherhood were like you, I almost think, in time, I should become a convert to your faith."

"Heaven grant that such may be eventually the case, my son. Now I must be going, but remember that if at any time you need counsel or advice, I am ready and willing to give it."

"Goldie was wrong after all," Macgregor murmured to himself, when Father Clement had taken his departure, and he prepared to set forth once

more to his labours. "I'm glad I told him all about everything; fancy his finding me out! I wonder if Goldie told him anything? Scarcely, I should think, for his own sake; one doesn't care to be the friend of a man who has been accused of murder. Jolly old boy, Father Clement! he'd convert me in no time if I saw much of him. Hope I shant then, for the dear mother's sake. She would be horrified to hear that I had even scraped acquaintance with a Roman Catholic priest; bless her!"

A smile was on his lips, even though a half sigh escaped him; and then Bertie put on his hat and went forth to his daily occupation.

Coming home again towards evening he encountered Robertson walking slowly down the Place St. Mark. The latter would have passed him with a simple raising of his hat. Macgregor stopped him.

"I hope you are all right again," he said, kindly.

"Quite, thanks, Captain Macgregor; I beg your pardon, Mr. Trehern; the old name slips out more naturally. I have been very ill since that night—

almost at death's door; but, heaven be praised, I have recovered to finish the dread expiation that heaven requires of me. I am like the wandering Jew! ha! ha! No rest! no rest!"

He uttered the words wildly, with such a look of insanity upon his face that Macgregor was startled.

"We are both going the same way; I will walk on with you," he said, anxiously.

Robertson looked at him in surprise, but made no answer; and for some minutes they walked on in silence, Macgregor noticing, with a keen feeling of pity, the feeble walk, and white, hollow-cheeked countenance of the Grayling schoolmaster.

"Sad thing the death of Madame Riletto, wasn't it?" he remarked, at length, his mind going back to the night at the opera, when he had last seen Robertson.

The latter let fall his stick with a loud clatter upon the pavement. He stooped to pick it up, the exertion rendering his face tenfold more white and ghastly than it had been before.

"Very sad," he replied, hurriedly.

"You have heard, I suppose, the cause of her death?"

Robertson started, and with difficulty suppressed the exclamation which rose to his lips.

"It is only one of the spasms I am subject to," he said, as Macgregor stopped short and stared at him. "Yes, I have heard she was—murdered."

"Not exactly that, but tantamount to it. That scoundrel Gresham seems to have killed two birds with one stone. I suppose they will catch him before long; the police are not often baulked of their prey in the long run. Poor devil, I suppose his provocation to kill Rolton was"—

"I—I don't think I will go any farther. The faintness, to which I am a martyr"—with a sickly smile—"is coming on. I will turn into this café. Good-bye, Mr. Trehern; thank you for your kindness; I do not deserve it! Some day you will be glad you"—

Robertson grasped the hand of his astonished companion, and disappeared within the doorway of the café.

"Well, this beats all!" Bertie exclaimed aloud, as he proceeded on his way. "Never came across such a queer chap in my life! Looks as if he were on the high road to a lunatic asylum. Pity

he hasn't got somebody to look after him, poor fellow; it must be confounded hard to be at death's door in a foreign country, and among strangers. What in the world he has been doing here all this time is a wonder to me: in Venice too, of all places! Well, he knows his own business best, of course; it's nothing to do with me. All the same, I think I'll introduce Father Clement to him the first opportunity. *He* might be able to cheer him up a bit."

CHAPTER V.

BUTTERCUPS AND DAISIES.

The London season was nearly over. The fêtes, garden parties, theatres, receptions, brilliant balls, and gorgeous soirées, would ere long be a thing of the past—to be dreamed over by youth and beauty till the time for them should come round again, to be looked back upon with hearts full of disappointment and chagrin by many who had hoped so much, and had been so woefully deceived. Many grand matches had been arranged, many hearts broken, many fortunes made and marred; and now the anxious mothers and chaperones were beginning to experience a sense of coming rest from their labours; while weary Members of Parliament dreamed of the fragrant heather-covered moors, and heard the whirr of grouse and pheasants as they rose up before the "click" of the guns which sounded their death knell.

As yet, however, there were no outward signs of the season drawing to a close. Parliament was as

busy as ever; the round of gaiety went on in ceaseless whirl, as though the few remaining weeks were too precious for one single moment to be lost.

Among the acknowledged belles of the season were the Mervyn girls and the two Leslies. Lady Denison was certainly gifted with taste in choosing for presentation to society such lovely additions to the galaxy of beauty assembled in London at this time; and Mrs. Clifton Bailey felt amply rewarded for her trouble in chaperoning her nieces by the interest and admiration they excited.

Not a little purturbation lurked in the minds of the dwellers at the Abbey and Abbott's Home as to what would be the result of this visit of the girls to London, for hints of their conquests had from time to time reached the ears of their relatives; and while Olive and Phyllis trembled for the choice their sisters might make, Mrs. Mervyn felt her hopes rising in proportion to the approaching further aggrandisement of her family.

What new triumph was in store for her she often wondered, as she read the accounts in the papers of her daughters' beauty, saw their names at every ball and reception (where a minute de-

scription of their dresses followed as a matter of course), and heard their praises sounded on every side.

Foremost among the queens of society was Gwendoline, Lady Sylvestre. Her house was the resort of all the rank and fashion of the season. Her receptions were crowded, her balls the best attended. She set the fashion in dress, in the appointments of her household—in everything; and her husband's delight in his beautiful wife was unbounded. Yet in all her triumphs, in all the adulation she received, Gwendoline never cast aside the cold, proud look which had become habitual to her; and people wondered, as they looked at the beautiful face, what could have called that expression there.

It was the "receiving" day of the Duchess of C——, and her spacious drawing-rooms were filled with a goodly assembly, who, teacup in hand, sat and talked and flirted; while distinguished amateurs, or still more distinguished professionals, delighted the ear with their vocal and instrumental talent.

Within the embrasure of a bow-window,

obscured from too-observant eyes by the leafy screen of a huge stand of hothouse flowers, sat a girl and a man.

Lieutenant Wincombe thought he had never seen Mildred Mervyn look so fair and sweet as she did this afternoon; and never did his small fortune and precarious prospects look so small and precarious as at present. He had never longed so much to be rich as he had done since that fair June evening when he had first encountered the glance of the soft brown eyes which had such power to thrill him to his soul, and heard the gentle voice he grew to love so well.

"And do you know, I saw the sweetest little pug you can imagine. I did so want it," Mildred was saying.

"And why didn't you have it?" he asked, wishing that he could go off this very minute and get the animal she coveted.

"Because it belonged to Lady Danvers; and she told me she wouldn't part with it for anything! She called it her precious lambkin," laughing.

"Miss Mervyn—would you condescend to accept a pug if I got you one?"

Mildred looked at him in wonder; then as she

noticed the anxious expression of his face, she coloured and hesitated.

"You are very kind to think of it," she murmured, "but— What is that song Mr Carghill is singing?" breaking off abruptly.

"Eh? Oh, I don't know. Shall I go and ask?" half-rising from his seat, so anxious was he to do anything to serve her.

"Oh dear no; it doesn't matter. It was something like that song, the 'Little Tin Soldier.' Do you know it?"

"Yes. A fellow, poor Macgregor, used to sing it once. Awfully good voice he had. We used to chaff him, and call him the "Little Tin Soldier" for a long time."

Mildred laughed, then looked grave.

"We knew him too," she said. "Wasn't it a pity he went away from England? I would have stayed if I had been he. He was so nice!" with a little sigh.

Guy Wincombe felt a sort of disagreeable sensation come over him.

"He was a very good fellow—a great favourite in the regiment," he said, slowly.

"Was it your regiment he was in?" quickly.

"Yes."

"I had forgotten that. It was a very sad affair, wasn't it?" lifting sad, sweet eyes to his.

"Very. Did you know Mr. Raynor too?"

"Yes; hush. Dont' say you knew anything of Captain Macgregor before my sisters; they are—Yes, Janet; I am coming."

Mildred rose from her seat as she spoke, and without finishing her sentence, hurried away, to Lieutenant Wincombe's unbounded surprise and (it must be confessed) chagrin.

What was Macgregor to *her* that he must not mention his name before her sisters?

"Have you and Lieutenant Wincombe been quarrelling, Tom? He looked like thunder when he went away," said Auriol, as the twins drove off with Lady Sylvestre and Janet.

Mildred coloured.

"No, we had only been talking of—of pugs."

"Not a subject for dissembling, certainly," said Gwendoline. Then, suddenly turning to her sister, she added, "I thought I heard you mention Captain Macgregor as we passed."

Again Mildred coloured, and glanced nervously

at Janet. The latter, however, was absorbed in the contemplation of a programme which one of the musical professors had given her, and did not look up.

"Yes; Lieutenant Wincombe said they always called him the 'Little Tin Soldier' in the regiment because he used to sing that song."

"What a shame!" broke in Auriol so vehemently that Janet lifted her eyes in wonder. "Why, the tin soldier had only one leg!"

"He was none the worse for that, though. I always thought him a beautiful character when we were children, and I never would let Bob throw away his toy soldiers. We used to bury them in the garden; don't you remember?"

"Yes, and we always had them interred with military honours," said Auriol laughing; "a volley of musketry from two toy guns and a pea-shooter, with the 'Dead March' played upon a comb and the tin whistle. I used to *love* those military obsequies."

"So did I," Mildred echoed, laughing too.

"All the same, I don't think Captain Macgregor was at all like that chivalrous individual who was

thrown into the furnace with that deceitful little dancer," said Auriol.

"He stuck to her through it all, though, and I always felt so glad her pride had a fall. Captain Macgregor wouldn't care long for a woman who scorned *him*, I know," Mildred remarked as the carriage drew up at No. ——, Lancaster Gate, where Lady Silvestre had promised to set them down.

"Are you tired, Gwen?" said Mildred, as she noticed how white and wan her sister looked.

"Yes, rather," she replied, wearily. "I hate these afternoon parties. Tell Aunt Caroline I will chaperone you to the opera to-night if she doesn't want to go."

"Bravely shouldered his musket,
Fain her love would be,"

hummed Mildred, as she watched the carriage drive away.

* * * * *

"Mildred, I want to speak to you."

Lady Denison entered the drawing-room one morning a few days after, where her niece was.

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the contemp[illegible]

the musical [illegible]

look up.

"Yes: [illegible]

called him [illegible]

because he [illegible]

"What [illegible]

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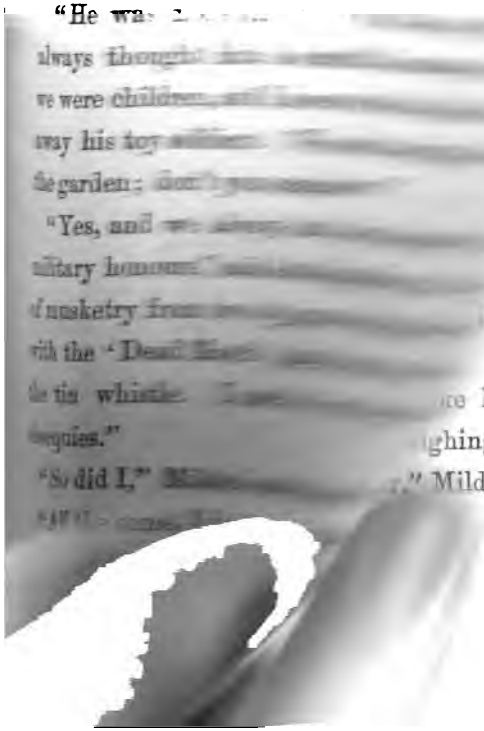

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," Mildred ventured.

"Auriol is the greatest idiot I ever came across!" her ladyship exclaimed vehemently, her vexation making her abusive. "The idea of a man in Lord Danvers' station of life being *vulgar*."

"She says he swore at his groom one day when he met him in the Park; and he wears such a heap of jewellery," Mildred went on, evidently considering the latter accusation a clencher.

Perhaps Lady Denison thought so too, for she did not answer, only fanned herself with angry persistency.

"I am resolved to do my duty by you girls as I did by Gwendoline, and I must say that I am excessively annoyed at Auriol's unaccountable behaviour in this matter," she said presently. "Your mother would be much displeased, too, if she knew of it. You must both of you make good matches. By-the-bye, that reminds me I do not like to see that Lieutenant Wincombe so much with you, Mildred. He has no money, and, as far as I can learn, no expectations. You must begin at once to discourage his attentions."

Mildred made no reply. She had turned her back upon her aunt, and was pulling the petals,

one by one, from the rose she had fastened in her gown. Lady Denison could not see her face.

"Do you hear me, Mildred?"

"Yes, Aunt Caroline."

"I stand to you in your mother's place at present, and I am certain I am speaking her own thoughts upon this subject. In giving you the benefit of a season in London we did not mean you to throw yourself away upon the first penniless fortune-hunter who makes you an offer."

"Lieutenant Wincombe has not made me an offer," was the low-spoken reply.

"Nor will he if I can help it. Now, I want you to promise me you will use your influence with Auriol to induce her to reconsider her refusal of Lord Danvers. Will you, my dear?"—more kindly.

"Yes, I will speak to her."

"That is right. I want my 'buttercups and daisies,' as they call you, to make good marriages for the honour of the family, and Auriol can set the example at once."

Lady Denison rose and left the room, and

Mildred returned to her practising, but somehow Beethoven was rather a failure. The music was blurred and indistinct, and after numerous false notes, and an insane desire to "thump," Mildred left the piano and went to find Auriol.

CHAPTER VI.

"THE LITTLE TIN SOLDIER."

A YEAR ago—only one short year ago—since she had sat exactly where she was sitting now under the starry moonlit sky, and had listened to the voice which never more would sound in her ears with that tender, loving cadence which gave a double meaning to every word Bertie Macgregor had uttered to the woman who was all the world to him.

Gwendoline knew and felt within herself that the gulf which now divided them was an eternal one. She remembered the coldly-worded sentence of courteous congratulation which he had spoken to her on her wedding day, when for one brief moment they had stood together in the hall at Abbott's Home, remembered the look of calm indifference with which he had returned the tender deprecating glance she had bestowed upon him, and she understood that as far as *he* was concerned

they would meet henceforth as the merest acquaintances.

And they *must* meet some time or other. In the days to come, when time should have smoothed away the misfortunes which had lately beset him, Bertie Macgregor would return to England and mix once more in the society which had once considered him one of its brightest ornaments. There would be no escape from meeting him there, for Lord Sylvestre liked him, and would insist upon his being on the most friendly terms with himself and his wife, and then—

"I beg your pardon."

Gwendoline roused herself from her reverie with a start, to find that her partner had come to the end of a long harangue of which she had not heard one single word, and was putting a question to her of evidently vital importance, for he had bent forward and was gazing anxiously through his gold *pince nez* into her face.

"I was asking if you felt cold," he said; "you shivered."

Lady Sylvestre laughed.

"It was somebody going over my grave, I sup-

pose," she said, lightly, "for one could not feel cold this insufferably hot weather. I am rather tired to-night," apologetically; "I have had such a hard day to-day."

"Il faut souffrir pour être belle," quoted her partner. "Lady Sylvestre, you are one of our queens; your labours have their reward in the adulation of your subjects."

"You are a sad flatterer, Sir Henry," she replied languidly, taking the compliment, as she did all the rest of the homage she excited, with calm indifference.

"Nay," he said, "one could not flatter *you*, to whom flattery would come so far short of the actual truth."

"What did you think of Lady Anne as a bride?" Lady Sylvestre asked abruptly. This short-sighted baronet's compliments wearied her.

"Lady Anne? Oh, passable. Brides never look well unless they are fair. They can't study the becoming, it seems to me, in the conventional wedding dress."

"White is not becoming to her either. She always wears such striking colours; and with her

Jewish style she requires something artistic," Gwendoline said, studying the painted Watteau figures on her fan.

"Just so. A crimson dress and yellow bonnet would have looked far better than that thick ugly veil she had on."

"My dear Sir Henry, the thick ugly veil was Brussels lace, a present from the Austrian Ambassador's wife," Gwendoline exclaimed, laughing.

"Was it? Well, I thought it ugly. Wasn't she once engaged to that young fellow who murdered somebody in the Isle of Wight last year, Macgregor of the Highlanders?"

"Who, Lady Anne?"

Gwendoline's voice was calm as ever, but the little Watteau maiden she was studying so intently seemed suddenly to begin to dance the Scotch reel.

"Yes, somebody told me so; I don't remember who it was."

"Did you know him—Captain Macgregor?"

"Not personally. Sir Arthur Dashwood, my cousin, who is British Consul at Venice, gave him the post of secretary after the affair was settled

satisfactorily. Rather a risk, I thought, because the case looked decidedly fishy. However, Arthur always was an eccentric individual."

"Captain Macgregor was entirely innocent of that murder, Sir Henry. You wrong him by even supposing he could have done such a thing."

Lady Sylvestre spoke so severely, that the baronet looked at her in astonishment.

"I—I beg your pardon," he said; "I didn't know you were"—

"Captain Macgregor was, and is, a great friend of my husband's and mine," was the calm reply.

"I have heard him spoken of as a nice young fellow," Sir Henry Roathe said, anxious to make amends for his former speech, "and a man I know who met him in Venice lately, says he is a great favourite among the ladies. There is some girl out there, the daughter of a Venetian noble, who is running after him awfully, and he seems to like it too," with a little chuckling laugh, for which Gwendoline could have found it in her heart to box his ears.

"Captain Macgregor was always a favourite wherever he went," she remarked coldly, as she

rose from her seat. "It is rather chilly out here after all. Shall we go back to the ball-room?"

Through the lace curtains came the sound of the "Dreamland" waltz. "Could they play no other tune but that?" Gwendoline wondered, and shivered beneath her satin and diamonds.

"Gwendoline," said Lord Sylvestre, coming up to her as she sat listening to the old Duchess of Scandalmore's abuse of her dearest friends between the intervals of a dance, "I have brought you a partner; Mr. Goldie." The stranger and Gwendoline exchanged bows. "He has just come from Venice, and is a great friend of poor Macgregor's."

Gwendoline's lip took its haughtiest curve. It always irritated her that her husband insisted upon speaking of Bertie as *poor* Macgregor. She could not have told why exactly, but so it was.

"Bertie has talked to me so often of you and your husband, Lady Sylvestre, that when I heard you were both here to-night I took upon myself to beg for an introduction," Ralph Goldie said.

Lady Sylvestre looked keenly at him. How much did he know of her former relations with Captain

Macgregor? Surely Bertie would never have been so mad as to tell him everything? She set herself to work to find out.

"Are you engaged for the next dance, Lady Sylvestre?"

"No; but I did not intend to be, I am tired."

"Then we will sit it out."

Mr. Goldie took the vacant seat on the other side of her, and possessing himself of the fan which she was gently oscillating to and fro, began to fan her with gentle familarity. The old Duchess was deaf, and moreover had secured the ear of a kindred spirit, into which she was pouring a catalogue of her imagined woes. Gwendoline felt that there was no escape.

"Was Captain Macgregor well when you saw him last?" she asked at length, trying to speak indifferently.

"Very well, and uncommonly jolly too. Quite another man to what he was two months ago. Then he never would go anywhere, became quite a recluse in fact. Now he seems to have got over that absurdity, and accepts every invitation which is sent him, and they are not few, for he

is an immense favourite, especially with the ladies."

"Does he like what he is doing?" Gwendoline asked, feeling compelled to say something.

"He appears to do so. Of course he still regrets his retirement from the army, and to such a lazy fellow as he always was, the being obliged to do a certain amount of work every day must be a bore, but he doesn't complain. Between ourselves, I fancy the influence of—

> The light that lies
> In woman's eyes,

had not a little to do with his uncomplaining acceptance of the inevitable," laughing.

Gwendoline did not speak, she was gazing straight in front of her at the dancers, but to her face the haughty inflexible expression had come back.

Ralph Goldie, looking at her, wondered at his friend's rapturous praises of her beauty. She was not so fair, he thought, as the girl whose face came before his mind's eye even now; a face framed in soft brown hair, with tender sweet grey eyes.

"Macgregor always was a lady's man," he went on. "I can remember heaps of love affairs he had before he had even left off Eton jackets. I often wonder he has kept out of the matrimonial noose so long, but from what I have gathered lately I fancy he has been what ladies call 'disappointed.'"

Again Mr. Goldie laughed. Gwendoline thought him the most disagreeable man she had ever met.

"If he only goes in for Marie di Portici, he will make a good thing of it. The father is fabulously rich, and this is his only child."

"Is she pretty!" Lady Sylvestre forced herself to ask.

"*Lovely!* dark as a gipsy—with beautiful eyes and most charming manners. Macgregor goes there a good deal I fancy."

"Have you come to England for long?"

Ralph Goldie was taken somewhat by surprise at the sudden changing of the conversation.

"No, I return to Venice next week. I have come to make some inquiries about a man who has been murdered by an Englishman somewhere in Italy, and discover if possible whether he has any

relatives who could give any information as to the probable murderer."

Lady Sylvestre shuddered.

"Do not talk of murder—it—it reminds me of"—she stopped abruptly.

The hands lying in her lap were picking to pieces, one by one, the roses in her bouquet. She seemed so agitated that Goldie was alarmed.

"Dear Lady Sylvestre, forgive me! I am such a rough fellow, not fit for ladies' society; it comes from living so much alone I suppose, one gets rough and bearish."

Gwendoline recovered herself with an effort.

"The—the murder so near us, shocked us dreadfully, and we knew and liked both Captain Macgregor and poor John Raynor so much, that it naturally makes us think of that dreadful time. You must not think me one of those dreadfully nervous, hysterical women—who are frightened at nothing," she added, looking up with such a sweet, deprecating expression in the blue eyes, that Ralph quite started, and no longer wondered that Bertie had called her the most beautiful of women.

"I shall think nothing, but that you have a tender woman's heart, always sensitive to the woes of others," he said, gently.

"Lady Thylvether, thith ith owr danth, I think."

Lord Dimsdale's lisping tones made Gwendoline start, she turned to Ralph Goldie—

"Mr. Goldie, when you see Captain Macgregor again, will you tell him from me that I am glad he is well and happy, and that I hope he will not forget his English friends who care"—

She did not finish the sentence, but turned away to take the proffered arm of the Marquis. Then with a coldly-spoken farewell, moved off with him to join the dancers.

"This is queer," murmured Ralph Goldie, to himself, as he went to seek his partner, "she looks a statue, speaks like an angel, moves like an antomaton, and evidently has the heart of a tender, loving woman. What can it mean?"

But though during the ten days of his stay in London, Ralph Goldie often came across the beautiful woman, who was turning the heads of all London this season, he never solved the pro-

blem to his satisfaction—indeed she became more an enigma to him than ever, and he gave up at last in despair.

The officers of the ——th were giving a grand amateur concert at the Hanover Square Rooms. All London was there in gorgeous array—all wealthy and aristocratic London, I should have said, for the tickets were a guinea each, and only to be obtained by personal acquaintance with the distinguished performers.

When Lieutenant Wincombe so far forgot himself (according to Lady Denison), as to present three gratis to herself and her two nieces, she declared that nothing should induce her to accept them.

"Not but what your uncle gives a hundred guineas every year to this hospital," she said, grandly. "Still if a concert *is* for a charity, what in the world do people want to be *giving* the tickets away for; I call it cheating the hospital, myself."

"Lieutenant Wincombe is a performer, aunt," Mildred said, hastily. "I suppose he can do what he likes with his own private tickets."

"Certainly, my dear, only I wish he had *liked* to dispose of them to somebody else. *I* shall not go, and I shall not hear of your doing so."

However, in answer to a secret communication from her sisters, Gwendoline came to the rescue.

"She must take the girls," she said, "Robert was going to a large Conservative meeting somewhere, and Janet did not think her cold was well enough to risk going out."

She could not go alone, so Lady Denison had to give in, but she would not go herself nor take the slightest interest in anything to do with the affair.

"Lieutenant Wincombe is going to sing 'White Daisy,'" whispered Auriol, as she glanced down the programme when they had taken their seats in the crowded hall, "aren't you glad, Gwen?"

"No, I hate it!" was the startling response.

Nevertheless, when the familiar words broke upon her ear, Lady Sylvestre felt the hot tears welling up into her eyes, and wished within her inmost soul that she had not been so silly as to come at all.

The song caused much applause. Guy Wincombe had a good voice, almost as good as Bertie Macgregor, Gwendoline acknowledged to herself. The "encores" were deafening. He came forward again, and this time looked deliberately along the rows of expectant faces, till his eyes lighted upon Mildred Mervyn and rested there. Something in their glance made her strangely nervous. She bent her crimson face to her programme, nor lifted it again while he stood upon the platform.

He was a little tin soldier,
One little leg had he,
She was a little fairy dancer—
Bright as bright could be.

She had a little castle and garden,
He but an old box dim,
She was a dainty rose-love,
Far too grand for him.
He was a little tin soldier,
One little leg had he.
Bravely shouldered his musket,
Fain her love would be.

Once as he watched his rose-love
Winds from the north did blow,
Swept him out of the casement
Into a stream below.
True to his little lady,
Still he shouldered his gun,
Soon, ah! soon came the darkness,
Life and love undone.

He was a little tin soldier,
One little leg had he,
Ne'er in this world a lover
Half so true could be.

Once more he sees his rose-love,
Still she is dancing gay;
He is worn and faded,
Loyal still for aye.
Then came a hand that swept them
Into a furnace wide,
Parted in life—in dying,
They are side by side.
Ah! for the little tin soldier,
Ah! for her cruel part,
There lies her rose in ashes,
There his loyal little heart.

Of the rest of the songs down upon the programme two out of the audience could have given the most indistinct idea, each was busy with her own reflections. To Mildred Mervyn, in spite of her mother's precautions, in spite of her aunt's warnings, the sweet awakening to "Love's young dream," had come in all its intensity.

She would not be like the horrid little dancer in the song; *she* would not scorn him because "she had a castle and garden," while "he had only an old box dim," not a bit of it, and as the song ceased, she looked up and catching the glance of the tender loving eyes—smiled at

him, a smile of half earnest, half mirthful reproach.

Poor Gwendoline! *Her* little tin soldier had indeed been cast by the bitter north wind of misfortune out of the casement—out of society and far from those who loved him. *She*, the wicked, heartless fairy rose-love, was still (to all appearance) dancing gay, while he was "dreeing his weird" in foreign lands. But no doubt he would love the beautiful Italian girl in time, and forget her, who had treated him so badly. The last part of the song would not come to pass, for not even in dying would they two ever be "side by side" again.

"A charming concert, dear Lady Sylvestre! Such talented performers as we have among those delightful officers, is really too utterly ethereal! One can only trust that our army in time will come to realize the divinity of sound, and recognize the immortal ascendancy of the artistic and mediæval!" And Miss Euphemia Byron tossed her tangled mane, gathered up her bedraggled skirts, and with a languishing look from her hollow eyes, moved on towards her carriage, leaving the

unfortunate recipient of her rhapsodies in a state of bewildered collapse.

When Gwendoline returned home, after taking Auriol and Mildred to Lancaster Gate, she found Janet awaiting her in great excitement.

"Oh, Gwen! what *do* you think? That dreadful little Lord Dimsdale, has been here this afternoon."

"*Lord Dimsdale?*" echoed Gwendoline, amazed.

"Yes, and he"—here Janet, for the first time for many months, broke into a hearty and genuine peal of laughter—"he—he actually"—here the laughter came again, and Gwendoline, in spite of her disquietude and uncertainty as to what was coming, joined in—"he asked me to marry him! Oh, dear! dear! I shall never get over it!" laughing again.

"But, Janet—my dear Janet—you have not *refused* him?" earnestly.

Janet took away the handkerchief with which she was wiping the tears of laughter from her eyes and stood looking at her sister in amazement.

"Of course I have," she said, at length.

"Oh, Janet, what *will* mamma say?"

Lady Sylvestre could have wrung her hands in her dismay. Well she knew how Mrs. Mervyn's hopes were centered in this match; how she was looking forward to announcing that her daughters had in their very *first* season secured the best matches in London. Only that very morning Gwendoline had received a letter from her mother, urging her to lose no opportunity of furthering the expected alliance. What *was* to be done?

"Why have you refused him?" she asked, almost crossly.

"Gwendoline! surely you give me credit for better taste, than to think I should accept that conceited little prig, even if he were royalty itself. Besides, I am not going to marry anyone; my heart is buried in John's grave," a little sob accompanied the words, "and I shall never marry anyone else. Mother knows I shall not."

"I think mother wanted you to marry Lord Dimsdale," Gwendoline said gravely.

"I cannot help that. I do not see why we must all marry for wealth and a title. *You*, Gwen, should be the last to advocate it."

"And I don't advocate it. It is only on *your*

account that I am anxious for you to do as mamma wishes," replied her sister almost deprecatingly.

"I think I shall be able to make mamma see this matter as *I* do," was Janet's remark as she left the room.

Gwendoline was destined to have another shock ere the day was over, for as they were together in the recess of a bow-window at Lady Denison's reception that evening, Mildred whispered softly—

"Gwen, dear, I have something to tell you, only don't say anything to anybody else just as present. Guy has asked me to marry him, and I have said yes.

"Guy? Who is Guy?" in bewildered tones.

"Mr. Wincombe. He says he feels like the little tin soldier, but I tell him that I shall never be like the horrid little dancer, for, oh Gwen! I love him so!"

Lady Sylvester looked at her sister, and mentally wrung her hands again.

"I cannot *think* what mamma will say!" she exclaimed.

CHAPTER VII.

OLIVE'S LOVE LETTER.

Mrs. Mervyn's vexation and disappointment knew no bounds when the news reached her of the threefold annihilation of her ambitious expectations. Janet and Auriol had thrown away the chance of being respectively a marchioness and a countess, and for what? Mrs. Mervyn could have shaken them both well for what she termed their silly and romantic inconsistency. And then, to crown her chagrin, Lieutenant Wincombe had had the audacity to write to her husband and ask to marry Mildred. Such impertinence!

Never had the inmates of Abbott's Home spent such a day as the one preceding the return of the Miss Mervyns from London. Their mistress seemed to make occasion for fault-finding, even where there was none, till one and all, the badgered domestics went in a body and gave warning, Thomas and the cook valiantly heading the assault.

"Oh," was all the reply elicited by the general "Please'm I wish to leave you this day month," but it was observed in the servants' hall that after this, things were changed for the better. For *them*, yes; for poor Miss Dufferin, no. *She* had been the recipient of all Mrs. Mervyn's ill temper which was not expended upon the servants, and when at last they capped their offences by giving warning, she then felt that at last even she could stand it no longer.

"I am very sorry, Mrs. Mervyn," she said, tears standing in her eyes. "Indeed, I have tried to do as you wish while I have been here, but you are never pleased with me, or seem to think that I do my best. Therefore I think it will be wise if I ask you to get some one else in my place. I shall be sorry to go, but I am sure it will be better."

"Oh"—but Mrs. Mervyn looked vexed. "Are you going to be married?" she asked abruptly, as Miss Dufferin waited for her to speak.

The girl coloured, and smiled a little.

"Not yet," she said gently.

"Then you do think of it. May I ask, if it is not

an impertinent question, whether you have been engaged long?"

Mrs. Mervyn's wrath was rising again.

"Only since last November. Mr. Cunmore"—

"What has Mr. Cunmore to do with it?" quickly.

"Nothing; at least"—Miss Dufferin hesitated, but by that unluckly slip she had betrayed herself, and further escape was impossible—"it is Mr. Cunmore whom I am going to marry."

"Then the report that you were running after him was true after all," Mrs. Mervyn began severely.

But now Miss Dufferin was angry, too, and stopped her.

"I do not know what you mean, Mrs. Mervyn, by my running after Mr. Cunmore. If you intend to infer that I behaved in any way improperly, I think it would have been kinder to have told me of it before. I have done nothing wrong—nothing that your own daughters would have been ashamed of."

"I suppose you are marrying him for his position. It is, of course, a good one for a governess; but I doubt"—

"I am marrying him because he loves me, and I return his love," the girl replied proudly. "*I* have always been taught that it is a sin to give your hand where you heart does not go with it," and with this parting thrust Miss Dufferin drew herself up and walked out of the room, leaving her employer in no enviable frame of mind.

So passed the day. After dinner, when the servants had left the room, Mr. Mervyn threw two letters across the table to his wife. One was that from Lieutenant Wincombe, the other his own answer.

Mrs. Mervyn took them up and read the first over with a smile of contempt. Her husband's reply gained more attention. Her very face became stony as she read it.

"You are not going to send it?" she said, when she had perused every word, even down to the bold signature at the bottom of the page, "*James Mervyn.*" "You surely would not *think* of sending it?"

"Certainly, my dear. I am going to send it."

"What! Let that penniless ne'er-do-weel of an

officer marry one of our girls? James, you must be *mad!*"

"No, I am as sane as I ever was in my life," replied Mr. Mervyn quietly. "Look here Sarah," rising from his seat and standing upon the hearth-rug, his coat tails under his arms, as though the grate contained a roaring fire, instead of the small conservatory which it was the custom to make of it during the summer months, "I am not going to have the children made unhappy for the sake of a worldly position and an empty title. Neither do they need to marry money alone. I want them to be happy, and we made a great mistake about poor John Raynor. I shall never get it out of my mind that he killed himself because we would not give him Janet; it weighs upon me more than I can say, and I am determined that I will not have another of the girls sacrificed."

Mr. Mervyn spoke firmly. It was seldom indeed that he went contrary to his wife, but on such occasions she knew that it would be as easy to move the sun from his course as to try and alter his decision.

"I don't call it sacrifice," she said, an angry

glitter in her eyes. "If the girls do not know what is good for them, it is our duty to act for them. It is nonsense to say we had any share in John Raynor's death. I am sure he has amply revenged himself upon us if we had, for Janet has refused a match which many a girl would have jumped at; it is really enough to kill one with vexation!" and the angry tears actually rose in spite of her at the thought of what might have been.

"Janet is quite right; that Dimsdale is an ass!"

Mrs. Mervyn looked at her husband as though she was not quite sure of his identity.

"Pray, is that your objection to Lord Danvers, too?" she inquired sarcastically.

"I don't know him, but I can trust Auriol. The girl knows a muff when she sees one."

"I doubt it," Mrs. Mervyn said curtly. "And when I have always tried so hard to keep my girls from being sentimental and romantic, it is really too bad of Mildred! I daresay it is only a silly fancy this of hers for that wretched officer!" pathetically.

"My dear, I expect if you could ask 'that wretched officer' this minute how he felt, he would tell you he was the happiest man in London," replied Mr. Mervyn laughing, and thinking of the letter from Mildred which had come, marked *private*, and which his wife had never seen, begging him to "make her and Guy happy, for that she should never, no, *never*, care for anyone else!" That letter was in his pocket at the present moment, and was what had prompted him for once to defy his better half, and give his consent to the (in her eyes) ill-advised union.

"Well, of course you know best," ironically; "for my part, the girls may take their own way for the future; I wash my hands of them. Only don't blame me if they turn out wretchedly with these foolish notions which you are encouraging."

"They won't do that, Sarah. Besides, I am not going to interfere more than I can help. In this case it is the recollection of poor John which has led me to act as I am doing."

"Poor John is at the bottom of all our misfortunes," thought Mrs. Mervyn, when her husband had gone to his study, and she was left to think

out her thoughts alone—serious thoughts of how to replace Miss Dufferin, whom she really liked, and the numerous domestics whose places would ere long be vacant.

* * * * *

Once more the evening shadows were deepening over the old Abbey garden, but no gay voices disturbed the silence which reigned. Above, the sky was full of stars, and a crescent moon shed her pale light upon the sleeping earth.

Out on the terrace, leaning against one of the gauntold eagles, stood Olive Leslie. She seemed to be waiting for some one, for every now and then she walked to the edge of the parapet overlooking the winding drive, and listened intently, then returned to take up her former station.

"They ought to be here now," she murmured. "I wonder what keeps them." Then she took a letter from her pocket, and tried to make it out by the fast fading twilight, but she tried in vain.

"I wish I knew what to think. He says he will tell me all when we meet. *All?* Does that mean he will confess—but no, I must not let that thought

come," she shuddered. "I wish he had not written this letter, and I wish I had not answered it as I did; but I was so afraid he would come, and then—then I could not have said "No."—She sighed—"it is better so. I cannot think what has so attracted me to him, except it was his most extraordinary likeness to poor Philip. Had *he* risen from his grave, and come back to me again, he could not be more like himself than is this man, who, for ought I know, may be a—but no, he could not! I will not believe it."

Once more she went to the edge of the parapet and listened, then came back—

"Fancy me with a love letter! What would the children say, and Phyllis, I wonder? How I want to see them again! it seems so long since they went. But we must learn to do without them, for we shall not keep them with us much longer. This comes of letting them go to London. Ah! here they are!"

The sound of carriage wheels became distinctly audible upon the still night air, and Olive left her post, and went to the Abbey entrance to welcome the travellers.

"So you have come back to us at last; how many hearts have you broken between you?" she said, as Connie and Mabel clung round her neck in exuberant spirits.

"Not *one*," triumphantly; "and oh, Olive, we are so glad to be home again!"

"Have you no welcome for another wayfarer, Miss Leslie?" said a voice close to her.

Olive started as though she had been shot. In her pleasure at seeing "the children" she had not noticed that there was another gentleman besides her brother Geoffrey.

Mr. Goldie noticed the start; was it a good omen? he wondered.

"I am glad to see you," she said gently, laying her hand in his.

"I will test the truth of that assertion by-and-bye," he replied in a low tone; then raising his voice, he added—

"I did not intend to have come down to-day, but happening to meet Geoffrey on the platform at Waterloo, he persuaded me (in spite of my qualms of conscience about leaving my business to

take care of itself) to come down with him and your sisters; that is how I am here."

He turned away to speak to Phyllis, but Olive knew the motives which induced him to make the seeming apology for coming uninvited, and respected him all the more for the delicatedly-worded hint that he understood her.

Before she went to bed that night, Olive took out, and once more read over, the letter which Ralph Goldie had written to her three days ago. A manly, fervent epistle, every word breathing of love and tender pleading. "I am presumptuous I know to write to you in this strain," it ran, "but I cannot wait in suspense any longer, neither could I bear to hear from your own lips that you will not be my wife. You will tell me perhaps that you do not know enough of me, that the occasions upon which we have met have been too few and far between, to allow of your feelings towards me being any other than those of the merest friendship, perhaps scarcely that. But I do not ask for more *yet*. In time you will learn to think of me as of one who regards you as the dearest object upon earth for *him*, one who entreats

you to think of him kindly, and not to refuse the love he offers," etc.

Olive knew that Ralph Goldie spoke truly when he said he loved her; she saw it plainly written in every feature of the handsome face, heard it in every tone of his voice when he addressed her, and yet she had refused his suit. The letter lying open before her had been answered almost by return of post; she did not mean to marry she had told him; he would find someone more worthy of his love than she. She prayed him to take her answer as final, and not to mention the subject again. And now he had come in person to urge his suit, she knew it; and how much harder it would be to answer him now, than when, with a few strokes of her pen, she had written what she tried to think would be wisest and best for her.

And disguise it as she might, even to herself there would come often and often the knowledge that of all men whom she had ever met Ralph Goldie would be the one she should choose as her husband. Once long ago when Philip Arne, her sailor lover, had found his grave amid the ocean billows, when she had watched and waited for his

return and he never came, when she had realised that she would never meet him again

Till the sea gives up its dead,

then Olive Leslie had made up her mind to remain single for the remainder of her life.

The memory of her dead love had been an ever present one with her. Although it was six years ago now, since the good ship "Agamemnon" had foundered off the coast of Madeira, and all on board had perished, she had never ceased to think of him. But lately his face had begun to be associated in her mind with that other, which was its living counterpart. The attraction which drew her to Ralph Goldie had its origin in the fact of his extraordinary likeness to the lover of her youth. This Olive knew and felt, and it served but to increase her desire to see as little of Goldie as possible.

The next day was a somewhat important one at the Abbey, in that it was the occasion of the momentous decision as to "the children's" future. Major Ponsonby had succumbed to the blue eyes and witching manners of Constance Leslie, and

Mabel had been even more fortunate in securing one of the best matches of the season, a wealthy baronet, whose family was as old as the hills, whose landed property was boundless, who had more money than he knew what to do with.

To both suitors Geoffrey Leslie had given a satisfactory reply, and the happy look upon the faces of the brides-elect led everyone to believe that the choice would turn out a desirable one.

"Douglas is *lovely!*" cried Constance.

"And Jim is *angelic!*" echoed Mabel.

"Barring his name," put in Phyllis quietly.

"I am sure it is a lovely name, much better than James or Tom," exclaimed Mabel wrathfully; "wait till you see him, Phyl, you would give your ears to be"—

"My dear child, don't get excited; how often am I to tell you that my day for such frivolities is past and done with. Olive and I are going to keep up the credit of the family by living and dying old maids, aren't we Olive?"

"Ye-es," said Olive dubiously.

And she meant it at the time, but the fates were already ordaining it otherwise, and before

the day was over she had to confess to herself that life was certainly better worth living than it was yesterday.

Sitting in her favourite nook of the old garden, where the roses and jasmine made a bower overhead, where a tiny stream babbled at her feet, and the violets peeped from their mossy bed, Olive thought and pondered over her sisters' future. She was glad they had found their future lot in such pleasant places, glad that now she need no longer worry herself with the uncertainty as to whether she had done right in bringing them down into the depths of the country, where they would have no opportunities of seeing anyone, and where no gaieties would brighten the monotony of their existence. Yes, she was very, *very* glad—so glad, that she sighed heavily.

"Where *did* that come from?" said a laughing voice behind her, and Ralph Goldie left his post by the trunk of an old sycamore tree, and came nearer to her. "Why do you sigh?" he went on, as after the first start at the sound of his voice she turned away, and continued her contemplation of the little sparkling stream, "I have been

watching you for the last ten minutes, and wondered what could have caused the varying expressions which crossed your face. Tell me," with gentle authority.

"I—I was thinking of my sisters," Olive replied.

"And what of them?"

"I was thinking how glad I am that they will be so well cared for in the future."

"Yes, it will be a great responsibility off your shoulders I should think; it was too great a one for a mere child like you."

Olive burst out laughing.

"Oh! if my sisters could only hear you. Why they look upon me quite as their mother. Mr. Goldie, do you know how old I am?"

"I think you are old enough to know better than to write me such a letter as you did the other day," severely. "Olive, you didn't mean it?" his tones changing to those of tender entreaty as he came close to her, and tried to see into her averted face.

"Did you mean what you said then?" he repeated.

"Yes."

"You will not marry me?"

"No."

"You are quite certain?"

"Quite."

"That is settled then," cooly. "May I have a cigar? You won't refuse me that I suppose to soothe my perturbed spirits?"

"Certainly, you can smoke if you wish it," with suddenly rising wrath. How dare he treat her as if he did not care that she had again refused him!

"Thanks."

Mr. Goldie calmly seated himself upon the garden seat by Olive's side, and took out his cigar-case.

"Do you know I am thinking of coming back to live at the Abbey," he remarked after a pause, during which he had been intently contemplating the still unlighted cigar between his fingers.

Olive started. This then was to be his revenge.

"Indeed!" she said coldly.

"Yes, I am tired of living abroad; I shall marry now, and settle down as a country gentleman in England."

"Oh," was all Miss Leslie's reply.

"I shall have all that disfiguring new wing taken down, and built up again in the old style to match the rest."

"That will cost a great deal," witheringly.

"Yes, but luckily I came into a fortune the other day, so it won't ruin me. An old nabob in India who condescended to be my second cousin, died, and I found he had made me his heir; very jolly, wasn't it?"

"Very jolly," mournfully.

Ralph put the cigar he held back into the case, and returned the latter to his pocket.

"Aren't you going to smoke after all?" Miss Leslie said, without lifting her eyes.

"No. I am going to talk to you."

"But I am going in now," half-rising from the seat.

"No you are not," laying a detaining hand gently on her arm; "sit down and look at me."

Miss Leslie did his bidding; but her cheeks were crimson now, her eyes full of tears.

Mr. Goldie studied the fair face intently for some moments.

"Olive," he said again, "will you marry me?"

She turned from him and burst into tears.

"I have told you twice that I will not," she said, between her sobs. "Why do you ask me again?"

"Because I love you so, my darling; and because," putting out his arm and drawing her gently towards him, "I think you love me a little; don't you, dear?"

There was no answer; but Miss Leslie did not draw herself away from the firm clasp of his arm. She only sobbed on with increased energy.

"Olive," gently, "speak to me."

Sobs.

"You do love me, don't you, Olive?"

More sobs.

"If you cry I shall doubt the fact, and go away, and you would not let me do that after making me so unhappy?" lifting the tearful face, and gazing lovingly into the dark depths of the grey eyes.

A smile broke over her face.

"Yes I would," she said, softly.

"No, you would not."

He bent his head and kissed her. Then, with her hand in his, he told her all—of his search for Lewis Rolton, which had caused his visits incognito to the neighbourhood, and he rather wondered at the little gasp of relief which Olive gave as he ended his recital; but neither then, nor ever after, did she tell him of her strange suspicion—a suspicion set at rest for ever now, as she listened to his voice, and felt how much he loved her.

CHAPTER VIII.

"ONCE AGAIN."

"AND this is Venice? Well, I am disappointed! I always pictured it to myself as a kind of earthly paradise—a sort of scene in a theatre, with perpetual sunshine, picturesque costumes, fairy gondolas gliding up and down to the sound of soft music. And now I see nothing but a dull sky, pouring rain, just as we have it in England; dirty-looking people all muffled up in dingy cloaks, and the gondolas look like hearses, so black and gloomy."

Lady Sylvestre stood at the window of the "Grand Hotel," beating a dispiriting tattoo upon the pane, and uttering her laments in a tone of aggrieved melancholy which made her husband laugh.

"My dear Gwen, it rains in Venice sometimes just as it does everywhere else. I am very sorry for you though, but perhaps it will clear up presently; I will go and ask somebody whether

it is likely to do so. I must just finish this letter first."

"Who are you writing to?"

"Sandeman. I am having Dean Court done up, as you said you would like to go there when we return to England. I settled all about it with him before we left, but I am so afraid he may forget something unless I keep him up to the mark. You said yesterday, you know, that you liked the arrangement of those gardens at the villa we looked over, so I shall have your rose garden at Dean Court laid out in the same way. Come and see if I have been explicit enough."

Gwendoline left her post by the window and went over to the table, a sigh escaping her lips. He was so good to her, this husband of hers, whom she did not love, and whom she had only married for his title and position. How she wished he would be hard and cold, even cruel to her, rather than study her every wish, and lavish upon her all the luxury that his love could suggest and money procure. She would be able then to treat him with coldness too, she would not be obliged to feel that she *must* like him, and keep

up an outward show of wifely affection towards him in return for his devotion.

The tears almost came into her eyes as she read the letter to his steward, in which her own name figured so conspicuously. "Lady Sylvestre wishes this and that done; see that Lady Sylvestre's rooms are perfect, and spare no expense in their arrangement, etc." All that was being done was for *her*, because *she* had once expressed a wish, which till now she had quite forgotten, but which her husband had treasured up to act upon in the future.

"He will understand, don't you think?" Lord Sylvestre said anxiously, as she laid the letter down without making any remark.

"Yes, I should think so; but, Robert," hesitatingly, "don't you think it is a pity to go to so much trouble and expense for *me?*"

She had laid her hand on his shoulder as she spoke. Lord Sylvestre drew it to his lips and kissed it.

"My darling, nothing is a trouble or expense where *you* are concerned," he replied, lovingly.

She pulled her hand away.

"You will spoil me utterly," she said, laughing, but there was bitterness in the sound. "Some day you will find out how unworthy I am of it all, and you will hate me. I am always telling you not to do this and that for me, but you will not heed me. This foreign tour, I know you only undertook it because you fancied I wanted to come, when you would much rather have gone off somewhere for your shooting. I said I would do as you liked, what more *could* I say?" vehemently.

Lord Sylvestre looked at his wife in mute surprise.

"This coming to Venice was no doing of mine. You *know* it was not. In all the time to come, whatever happens you will remember that—won't you, Robert? I said I would not come *here* of all places!"

Her tones were entreating. Once more she laid her hands on his shoulders, as she stood behind his chair; he could not see her face.

"Gwendoline, you are talking in enigmas; I don't know what you mean," he said, slowly.

"I mean this, that if you were to study your own wishes a little more, and my selfish whims

a little less, it would be better for both of us."

"Why?" turning his head to look into her face, a gleam of amusement in his own.

"Because some day you will hate me, and be sorry for all you have done for me—all the love and care you have expended on me. Then you will wish you had never seen me, as *I* do; for what return have I made, or can I make for it all?"

Lord Sylvestre had clasped her hands round his neck, holding them in his own. He laughed.

"My dearest, this rain has given you the blues, or you would not say such things to me. What more can a wife do for her husband than you have done for me? You do not need me to tell you again that you are all the world to me; if I lost *you*, my sweet pearl, life would no longer be worth the living. Do not be such a foolish child. Why you are actually weeping tears on our second honeymoon!" playfully. "Come, darling, kiss me, and be my happy little wife."

Lady Sylvestre stooped her head and did his bidding; but she sighed again. Why *would* he not understand her?

"And now I'll go and see what the people here think of this beastly weather. No wonder you grumble at me for having brought you to Venice," and taking up his letters, Sylvestre left the room, while his wife returned to her contemplation of the dreary scene from the window.

Not quite so dreary now. The clouds were breaking overhead, and a ray of sunshine darted out for one brief moment, only however, to disappear again, and make the prospect more gloomy than before. But it certainly seemed to be clearing up. Gwendoline prayed that it might. A whole day spent within the walls of the hotel would be dreadful, she thought.

If it cleared, they would go and see the villa which Lord Sylvestre wanted to take for a few weeks. It was charming, a perfect paradise; but then it had belonged to a great opera singer who had died there, and Gwendoline did not like the idea of inhabiting the place which report said had lately been the scene of a painful tragedy. Perhaps the poor actress had murdered herself, Gwendoline shivered, or, worse still, had been

murdered by a jealous husband. Both stories were afloat as to her sad end.

Then if they went and stayed at the Villa Riletto they would certainly some time or other come across Bertie Macgregor. They could not avoid him. Gwendoline knew that her husband meant to "hunt him up," as he said. He would easily be found, and then—

Lady Sylvestre's face grew pale, her hands trembled. Would he have forgotten by this time? Would he meet her as though they had never been anything more than acquaintances? Would she have to see him day after day, hear his voice, with its tender intonation, addressing her, bask in the sunshine of his presence, separated by the cold, icy gulf which now lay between them? She did not think she could do it. Why did not Robert come back? Why did he go and leave her alone to think these wicked and disloyal thoughts, which *would* come before her mind, and drive her mad? She must go and find—

"Un signore e venuto per parlarvi, signora."

Gwendoline turned quickly round as the voice fell upon her ear. The head waiter was shutting

the door behind him, and in the middle of the room stood a gentleman.

"Sono dispiacente di disturbarvi, signora—" he began, then stopped, and there was an awful pause. Gwendoline felt as if in another moment she should faint.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Lady Sylvestre."

Bertie Macgregor was the first to recover himself, and came forward, holding out his hand; but there was no smile upon his face, only a look of half-vexed surprise.

"I had an appointment to meet an English friend of the consul's here this morning. The waiter must have mistaken me when I asked for him, and thought I meant you. I am exceedingly sorry to intrude upon you," he said.

But Gwendoline had also recovered herself now.

"It is no intrusion, Captain Macgregor. We have been wondering if we should ever meet you; Robert has got quite excited on the subject," laughing rather nervously.

"When did you arrive in Venice?" he asked,

looking keenly at the beautiful face he loved so well.

"Late last evening. We are thinking of taking a villa—the Villa Riletto—such a pretty place, about half an hour's journey from Venice. Only for a week or two, of course."

"Ah, that was where Arlina Riletto died, poor thing. It is a pretty place."

"Yes, charming; but we heard that Madam Riletto committed suicide, is that true? I cannot fancy living there at all."

"No, she was murdered."

"*Murdered?*" Gwendoline looked horrified.

"Yes—not actually poisoned or assassinated; but as surely murdered as though such had been the case. She was married to some fellow in Cumberland, and ran away afterwards with his half-brother, whom it is said she always preferred. Well, the husband, it appears, came here after her, and coolly told her he had murdered his rival. The news killed her."

"How very shocking! She was the Prima Donna, they said."

"Yes; she was a fine singer. I used to go

and hear her every night when I first came. How are your sisters, Lady Sylvestre? Well, I hope."

How calm his voice was; how utterly indifferent his manner! Gwendoline felt as though she were in an ice-house.

"They are quite well, thanks. They have been introduced this season."

"All of them?"

"Yes."

"Are they going to follow your example, Lady Sylvestre, and take unto themselves husbands?"

Gwendoline looked up quickly, but there was not a shadow of sarcasm either in his voice or manner.

"They have had good offers, all three of them; but, unfortunately for my mother's hopes, they have refused them—at least, Janet and Auriol. Mildred is engaged to Lieutenant Wincombe."

"What, Guy Wincombe of the Highlanders? I am very glad; he is the nicest fellow I ever met. We were great friends in the old days," he sighed.

"I like him extremely; but mamma thinks he

has not enough money. I have not seen her since the girls went home, but I believe she is very vexed indeed. Janet refused Lord Dimsdale, and Auriol had an offer from Lord Danvers."

"Did she—did Auriol refuse him?" quickly.

"Yes"—looking rather surprised—"she said he was silly and vulgar."

"So he is; a regular puppy, but goes in for being a ladies' man, and all that; and he has plenty of money. I wonder at your sister refusing him."

"My sister would not marry a puppy for the sake of his money or position," Gwendoline began haughtily; then suddenly catching the look of contempt on Macgregor's face she stopped, and walking quickly to the window, stood looking out.

"I fear I must be going, if you will excuse so abrupt a departure," Bertie said, looking at his watch. "I must have a hunt for the man I really came to see."

"Will you not wait and see my husband, Captain Macgregor?" Lady Sylvestre said, as for one moment he took her hand in his. "He will be so sorry to have missed you."

"I—I will look in again, perhaps, another day," he said, hurriedly. "And, Lady Sylvestre, my name *here* is Trehern—Good-bye."

The faintest pressure of her hand, and he turned and was gone. Gwendoline waited till the door had closed upon him, then throwing herself down upon a couch, burst into a passion of angry, mortified tears.

The rain continued its ceaseless, monotonous patter upon the window pane. No sound disturbed the stillness in the large, sombre apartment but its dreary downpour, and Gwendoline's heartrending sobs. He had been so unkind—so utterly different to the old days, when every sentence he had uttered had been tenderness itself. "He—he was horrid and disagreeable; she hated him!" and Gwendoline's sobs broke out afresh. She did not consider their altered positions; she could not have told what reception she had expected to meet with at his hands. She forgot she was not the heroine of a three volume novel; that it was not likely Macgregor would throw himself into an attitude, gasping for breath, and uttering her name between the frantic efforts to regain his com-

posure ; that when they met it would not be as lovers, but as friends—*she*, the wife of his rival, lost to him for ever. She forgot everything but that this first meeting, which she had dreaded, yet looked forward to as something which would fill the aching void in her heart, was over ; and that Bertie only looked upon her now as he would look upon any other lady of his acquaintance, and with scarcely so much interest.

Suddenly a thought struck her. She raised her head proudly, and dashed the tears from her eyes. Of course, Bertie was going to marry this Italian girl she had heard so much about—that was the reason he no longer cared for her. Why should *she* (Gwendoline) waste her tears upon a man who cared not a straw whether he ever saw her again or not—she who had a kind, loving, and indulgent husband, who held her as the very apple of his eye ?

When Lord Sylvestre came back to the sitting-room at the hotel, he found his wife awaiting him in smiling welcome, all traces of her discontent vanished from her beautiful face, her manner almost affectionate.

"Who do you think has been here, Robert?" she asked, when her husband had finished his long explanation as to how he had been to post his letters and have a little fresh air; and how he had been kept by a loquacious jeweller to whom he had gone for a little "souvenir" for her ladyship.

"I can't guess," he said, as he fastened a gold bangle round his wife's wrist, and held it up before her eyes. "What do you think of that, cara mia?"

"It is very pretty," regarding it rather listlessly. "Captain Macgregor came. He mistook our rooms for somebody else's, or the waiter did, and showed him in here. He was so surprised to learn we were in Venice!"

"I should think so. What a good thing you were in. I must go and look him up at once. Where does he live?"

"I never asked him."

"Why, Gwen, you little goose! How in the world are we to get at him, then?"

"He said he would come again."

"Oh, that's all right. I hope he will; I like him so. How was he looking, poor fellow?"

"Very well," coldly.

"Handsome as ever?"

"Yes, I think so," still more coldly. "I did not notice him much. He wanted to hear all the home news."

"Did you tell him Auriol had refused Danvers? I always fancy she will have Macgregor in the end."

Gwendoline winced.

"You must not call him Macgregor," she said; "he goes by the name of Trehern here, he told me."

CHAPTER IX.

"EN AVANT."

He had seen her. The dreaded ordeal which he had known must sooner or later, be gone through, had come to pass. He had fought and conquered.

Bertie Macgregor knew now how great would be the trial which awaited him even yet, in the dim future. He must make up his mind to see her day after day, and take his place among her friends, with his heart yet full of the love which had never waned—but which never more must leave the secret and inmost recesses of his soul.

The darkness had come upon him again,

> Life and love undone,

for he saw her, the happy wife of another; had spoken coldly, courteous words to her, with his heart full of the passionate love which had but slept awhile, to awake in new strength at the sight of her.

> Once more he sees his rose-love,
> Still she is dancing gay;
> He is worn and faded,
> Loyal still for aye.

Yes, the best part of his life was being wasted in the dark shadow of suspicion and vain regret. He felt worn and faded, like the little tin soldier, whose story he had been wont to say was the best song ever written; and which at every jollification among the officers of the — Highlanders, had been always vociferously demanded.

"Come, Macgregor, give us the 'Tin Soldier,' there's a good fellow; it's out-and-out your best impersonation."

To which the Captain would reply, in his lazy fashion—

"It's no good you fellows trying to get a rise out of me by calling me the tin soldier, for there is no character in history I admire more. Awfully jolly little beggar he was—a regular trump!"

Gwendoline had not shown the slightest desire to learn anything of his doings; had not even enquired where he lived. Would it not be possible to avoid them altogether?

He would have left Venice, but the Consul had particularly desired his constant attendance just now on important official matters, and there was no escape, therefore, from the inevitable.

Well, he would get used to it, he supposed, just as he had got used to drudging at letter writing and translating official correspondence; sitting all day in a gloomy apartment, with not a soul to speak to or a friendly word to cheer him.

In Venice itself he had a few acquaintances among the nobility, who had taken up the handsome secretary on account of his courtly manners and decided air of *ton*; and foremost among these was the sister of Marie di Portici, the Contessa N——. At the Villa Carlina, where she and her husband resided during the spring and autumn, the Signor Trehern was ever a welcome guest; and there he would spend many an evening wandering in the beautiful gardens with the soft eyed Italian girl, whose voice was like music, whose face reminded him of an old picture in the gallery at Castle Macgregor, which he could remember having an admiring reverence for as a boy; and which was said to be the portrait of one of the Ladies Macgregor, a Tuscan by birth, who had married Sir James Macgregor for his money, and died two years after of a broken heart.

For Marie Portici the summit of happiness was

now reached. Her susceptible heart had succumbed at once under the fascination of the blue eyes and kindly tones of the young Englishman; and heedless of everything, her high and noble birth, and her father's choice of a husband for her from among the Venetian nobility, she lived but in the present, enjoying to the utmost the realization of

> The gift which God has given
> To man alone, beneath the heaven.

the gift of her young heart's first love.

And Macgregor never saw it—never thought for one moment that the girl in whose society he had spent so many pleasant hours was casting her tender, loving heart at his feet; that he might have won for himself fame, position, and a noble alliance, without a single effort, had he been so minded. The idea never entered his head. He saw in Marie di Portici a gentle, lovable maiden, who had looked kindly upon him, and spoken soft words of friendly sympathy when his heart was sore and smarting beneath the disgrace and disappointment which had come upon him. He admired her dark, southern beauty and soft, sweet voice; and he liked to talk to her and listen to her

singing in the twilight hour, when the air was calm and still, loaded with the fragrance of the flowers, and the stars came out one by one in the cloudless sky.

Beyond that, she was no more to him than any other woman of his acquaintance whom he liked and admired. His heart was still full of its devotion to the woman whom he had loved in vain.

Macgregor saw no more of the Sylvestres for some days. His duties kept him a close prisoner in the daytime, and the only diversion he allowed himself was an occasional visit to the theatre or the Villa Carlina. The Contessa was full of a fancy dress ball to be held at the Palazza Portici in honour of the coming of age of the daughter of the house, and for which preparations were being made on a scale of magnificence and splendour such as had never before been seen in Venice.

Bertie had at first refused the invitation to be present at the festivities, but his refusal had caused so many exclamations of regret, and so many reproachful glances from Marie's soft eyes, that at last, in spite of his former resolves to

absent himself from any gaieties of the kind, he was obliged to yield.

"The signor will see that we know how to do these things in Venice quite as well as they are done in his all-powerful country of England," the Contessa had said, laughing triumphantly.

"Sono del vostro avviso, signora," was the grave reply.

Marie di Portici leaned from the casement of her apartment in the Palazza deep in thought. It was the night of the ball. Already her maid waited to dress her in the costly garments she was going to wear, as a Venetian lady of the sixteenth century; but the girl did not take her eyes from their contemplation of the scene without, upon which they were resting with such a dreamy, far-away look, as though she saw nothing but the reflection of her own sweet dreams in the moon-lit towers "and gorgeous palaces," with their canopy of the deep blue evening sky.

"He will speak to-night, surely he will speak to-night," she murmured half aloud; "and oh! if he does, what can I say to show how dearly I love him?"

The rich colour deepened in her cheeks, the soft eyes grew bright and tender. "I think he must care for me a little; he tells me sometimes that my friendship is dear to him, that he loves to hear me sing, because it reminds him of happy days. He has been sorrowful, he told me, and weary and lonely," tears dimmed her eyes, "but he is happier now. Can I have had anything to do with that? Never shall I forget the day he met me in the Place S. Mark, and gave me back my vinaigrette. I knew it would bring him to me; it always brings me luck," she laughed softly to herself. "He told me he had not forgotten it, but that he did not know where to find me, and then when he saw me he remembered my face at once. It was one not to be forgotten, he said; ah, flatterer!" Again she laughed, a happy little laugh. "I wonder what his story is; he said he would tell it me some day, and that when I heard it I might be sorry I had ever been kind to him, but that is impossible. Would my father be angry if he knew I—but he is always kind and good to me; he will forget about the Conte

d'Albino. I shall tell him that my happiness is bound up in Bertie," she uttered the name half shyly, "and I shall say, 'Dear father, you must be content with one grand marriage for your daughters. Carlina loves her Roderigo, but I could never love Conte d'Albino; *never!*"

"Did you speak, Signora?"

The patient maid had come to her mistress's side again, eagerness in her voice and manner.

"The signora will let me dress her hair now? It will take some time, and the Contessa has sent word to say she hopes the signora will be ready in an hour, to help her receive the guests."

Marie rose quickly.

"Yes, yes, Guilletta, I will hurry; you must make me look my best to-night, because it is my birthday, you know."

"The signora will look like an angel in this beautiful dress," the maid replied enthusiastically, as she held it up for her mistress's inspection.

Marie looked at it, only half satisfied.

"It looks too smart almost; there is so much trimming. I wish I had not chosen it."

"Ah, now the Signora is troubling herself unnecessarily; the costume is perfect. There will be many broken hearts this night."

"Hush, Guilletta, now you are silly; come, do my hair quickly, and don't chatter so."

There was silence for some minutes, while the soft dark hair was being brushed and plaited with the long strings of pearls necessary to the Venetian lady's coiffure. Then Guilletta took the hair-pins out of her mouth, and spoke again.

"Has the signora seen the beautiful English lady whom all Venice is raving about?"

Marie turned her head quickly, nearly jerking the long plait of hair out of the maid's hands.

"No. Who is she?"

"That I cannot tell you, signora; but her husband is a milord."

"Oh, she is married then?"

Marie's head returned to its former position; her face as she contemplated it in the glass had regained its calm expression.

"Yes; the courier who comes with them is a friend of Carlo's; it was from him I heard about the lady, how beautiful she is, and how proud and

cold. They have taken the villa which used to belong to Madame Riletto."

"Ah, Lord Sylvestre and his wife. They are coming here to-night. I did not know she was so pretty as all that; who says so?"

"Everybody, Signora, who has seen her. She is fair, with lovely golden hair. The Signor Trehern knows them; Carlo heard them talking of him."

"Does he?" indifferently. "Strange he never told me," she murmured to herself.

The brilliant saloons were ablaze with lights, whose shades of delicately-tinted glass reflected the rays in a thousand prismatic colours. Flowers were everywhere, mingling their scent with that of the fountains of rose water which played at each end of the apartments, while silken hangings of pale pink added to the charm of the subdued colour, and harmonized well with the delicate fresco on the ceilings and upper part of the walls themselves.

The guests were beginning to assemble, and already a somewhat motley crowd had collected rund the raised dais upon which stood the Conte

and Contessa, he in court costume, she attired in a dress similar to that worn by her sister. Near them was the old Conte di Portici as an Italian noble of the last century, a tall, fine-looking old man, every inch patrician. He received his guests with kindly courtesy, and the smile upon his face relieved it of its somewhat stern expression.

The ball was at its height when Bertie Macgregor arrived, and many glances of admiration were cast upon the handsome young Highlander, for, to-night, Bertie had donned the dress of his clan, and in kilt and tartan once more appeared before the world as Macgregor of Macgregor.

He made his way at once to the daughter of the house, and Marie felt her heart throb with pleasure as she noted his glance of admiration.

"Do you like my dress?" she asked shyly.

"Signora, you are perfection. How many dances have you kept for me?"

"You can have this if you like."

"Molte grazie, Signora."

He placed his arm round her waist, and they glided away, many eyes following them.

"Your daughter and the Signor Inglese seem

well matched, Monsignore," said a lady who stood near the old count; "are they engaged?"

"Certainly not; my daughter will marry into a noble house, or remain single."

The count spoke sternly, more so than he would have done perhaps, had it not been that his eyes following the direction of the lady's beside him, had fallen upon the two figures gliding so gracefully round the room, and had marked the happy smile upon his daughter's lips, the apparently tender *empressement* in the manner of her partner.

"I will speak to her to-morrow, and tell her she must talk to him no more," the old man muttered to himself, "and she shall obey me."

Macgregor led his partner to an open window, beyond which was a moonlit balcony, tastefully decorated with flowers, and provided with seats.

"Shall we rest awhile?" he said, and with a smile she led the way through the casement, out into the calm pure night.

The music came to them in sweetest cadence from within; above, the moon and the stars looked down with kindly radiance. One heart beat fast

with happiness, the other alas! remained unmoved, beating for one who was unworthy the love and devotion of a lifetime, utterly indifferent to aught else in the world but *her*.

Marie leaned her white arms on the balcony, and looked down upon the varied scene below.

There was a long silence; Macgregor, his arms folded on his breast, was thinking of a night long ago, when he had stood upon another moonlit balcony beside Gwendoline Mervyn, and had heard her speak the words of love which his passionate declaration had called forth, "Oh, Bertie! do not tempt me, for I love you." How happy he was then, how—

"Signor, is anything the matter?"

The soft sweet voice beside him recalled Bertie to himself, and the present.

"Nothing, Signora," he said. "What a beautiful night."

"It is indeed," she replied softly, "but somehow," lifting her eyes to the bright heavens, "the moonlight always makes me feel melancholy."

Macgregor did not answer. He had turned from the balcony towards the lighted ball-room,

and was gazing intently at something or somebody with an expression Marie had never seen on his face before.

"How came the Sylvestres here?" he asked in abrupt, almost stern tones.

Marie started.

"The Sylvestres? Carlina knew Lord Sylvestre in Rome, and when she heard they were in Venice she sent them an invitation. Is Lady Sylvestre so pretty? Do you know her?" eagerly.

"Yes, I know her. She and her husband are just opposite now, talking to your sister; do you see them? Romeo and Juliet! Ha! ha! ha!"

He laughed a loud and bitter laugh. Marie was frightened.

"What do you know of them that you should look and speak like that?" she said in a low tone, laying her hand gently on his arm.

"Nothing wrong. They are old friends of mine. I—I knew Lady Sylvestre before she was married."

Marie withdrew her hand from his arm. She knew it all now. Those few words, "I knew Lady Sylvestre before she was married," were

enough. He had loved her once; he loved her now! How dark the sky had grown; surely the moon must be behind a cloud. No, it was there still, smiling mockingly at her. Cruel moon! To mock at a woe like hers.

"Let us go back now, I am cold," she said shivering.

CHAPTER X.

AN APPARITION.

"LADY SYLVESTRE, may I have the honour of this dance?"

Gwendoline turned at the sound of his voice, with difficulty suppressing the cry of astonishment which rose to her lips. Strange to say the idea of meeting him here, had never once entered her mind, although had she but connected his supposed infatuation for the Italian girl with what she had since heard of Marie Portici, she might have looked for him from the first, among the guests. But somehow, though Lady Sylvestre was trying, as far as in her lay to shut out his image from her mind, she never had as yet grasped the notion of his having transferred his love for her to another. Her nature was an eminently selfish one, and that she was not first and foremost in everything, never struck her for a moment. Where *she* was, every other star must pale, and this baneful supposition her husband uncon-

sciously fostered. She was all the world to him; everybody else must of necessity fall down and worship his divinity—at a distance.

"I trust you will not refuse my request, for old acquaintance sake," went on the persuasive voice she knew so well. How handsome he looked too, such a gallant young chieftain!

Lady Sylvestre consulted her ball card.

"I am engaged for this, but my partner has not been to claim me, so I will dance with you if you like. Have you seen Lord Sylvestre?"

"Yes; I have just come from him. I told him I was on my way to beg for one waltz from you."

"You do not understand me," she said, flashing a haughty look at him from the blue eyes, "it is nothing to Robert, whom I choose to dance with. I merely wondered if you had found him out, because he was so anxious to see you."

"And I, too, am very glad to see him again."

There was a slight, ever so slight a stress upon the pronoun, Gwendoline noticed it.

"I know you are not glad to see *me*, Mr. Trehern, without your telling me quite so plainly," she said, and there was a little quiver of the

sweet childish mouth, which could look so pathetic.

"Forgive me, I did not mean it," he whispered, bending his head to hers. "You know, you *must* know that I"—

He did not finish the sentence, but as he placed his arm round her, and they glided away in the wake of the other dancers, she could feel the trembling of his hand, and hear the catching of his breath, which was almost a sob.

"Let us go and sit out there, it looks so cool and inviting," Lady Sylvestre said, when the dance was over, and he was leading her back to her seat.

Macgregor followed her on to the balcony, where but a short time ago he had unwittingly crushed a loving heart for her sake—and once more side by side—moon and stars above them, a busy world beneath their feet, they stood, these two, who should have been all the world to each other, yet were for ever apart.

"How beautiful Venice looks to-night," Gwendoline murmured, softly.

"Very beautiful," he answered, but his gaze was

resting upon a far fairer vision to *his* eyes, the vision of his love, as she stood beside him now, in her gleaming satin robe, with the jewels in her golden hair, and flashing upon the white neck and arms—the Sylvestre diamonds—which she had chosen in preference to his life-long devotion.

Bertie could have torn them by main force from where they lay, sparkling and gleaming in mockery at his misery, and have cast them into the canal at his feet. Why had she crossed his path again, when he was trying so hard to forget her? Why must he look upon her in all her beauty and strangle the love which was consuming him. Why?

He set his teeth hard, and clenched his hands. Far away in the distance a party of singers in a gondola were pouring forth an Italian love-song; nearer and nearer it came, till the words themselves were distinctly audible—

> Love's eternal; slumbers never
> Love, I love thee, and for ever.

Over and over again came the sweet refrain mingled now with the music of a waltz from the ball-room. At this moment Lord Sylvestre joined

them. He looked quite handsome in his costume as Romeo, the quaint satin dress and short cloak suited him. Yet as he came and stood beside Macgregor, Gwendoline felt a shudder pass through her.

"Fair Juliet, wilt tread a measure?" he asked, touching her lightly on the shoulder.

"No, thanks—I am tired. Capt. ——, Mr. Trehern and I are going to sit out this dance. It is so lovely here."

"It is, by Jove. I wish I could stay and join in your interesting conversation, but I have been let in for two or three dances, and must go to see after them. How do you think my wife is looking, Macgregor?" turning her face round so that the full light of the moon fell upon it.

"I never saw Lady Sylvestre look better in my life," was the quiet reply.

"I am so glad you think so. I leave her in your charge, old fellow, till I come back," and with a parting nod, Lord Sylvestre disappeared into the glare of light within.

Again there was silence between the two. Gwendoline was watching the novel scene beneath, the gliding gondolas, stealing from the shadow of

some archway into the silvery path which the moon made upon the water, while upon the Rialto a gay crowd was assembled, whose voices mingled with the music from the serenaders.

But Gwendoline's thoughts were far away. She saw nothing of what she gazed upon so intently. Macgregor was watching *her*, and thinking how like the Juliet of his imagination she looked to-night. He would gladly have died to have been Romeo, even for one short hour—to hear her say once more she loved him.

"Captain Macgregor, are you never going to forgive me?"

She had turned towards him, and was furling and unfurling her fan in nervous haste.

"Lady Sylvestre, I have nothing to forgive"—

"If it would be any consolation to you to know it, I am unhappy too," she continued, as though she had not heard his answer. "I have bitterly repented my unhappy choice."

"Did I say I was unhappy?" he asked, coldly. "Besides, Lady Sylvestre, pardon me, but with such a husband as you have, you can scarcely call your choice an unhappy one."

"I did not exactly mean that," she began,

hurriedly, "Robert is goodness itself to me; but —but—oh, Bertie! forgive me!"

She sank into a seat near her, and covered her face with her hands.

"I told you before, Lady Sylvestre, that I have nothing to forgive. You chose between us; *he* had the title and wealth which you coveted, *I* had nothing but my great love to offer you. The world will tell you your choice was a most wise one; it is not for *me* to gainsay it."

How cold, how stern his voice sounded, pitiless and unrelenting as the icy blast which tears aside the cloak from the perishing form of a half-frozen beggar, and penetrates to the very joints and marrow, with its keen searching breath.

"But I am sorry now, indeed I am sorry," she wailed, lifting tearful eyes to his.

"Sorry for what? Surely not for the wealth, the title, and position which are yours. You cannot regret *them*, for they are what you considered better than all my love."

"I did at one time, I do not now. Bertie, I would give half my life to undo that time and have the days over again that are gone!"

She spoke vehemently, passionately. In all the months of their married life, her husband had never seen the look on her face for *him*, which was there now. Poor Macgregor felt that his vaunted courage, his loyalty to her as the wife of another, could not hold out much longer.

"Lady Sylvestre," he began, coming a step nearer to her, "do you know what you are saying? Have you no thought for *me*, no knowledge that I am but mortal, that you are tempting me, as never surely man was so tempted before. Good God! do you think I have no feeling? that my love for you was so brittle? that I can look upon you to-night without a thought of what *might* have been, without a single return of the love which has been such misery?"

He turned away, he the strong man, who had endured so much for her sake, who had never known what it was to fear anyone, or anything on this earth, and wept such bitter tears as seemed to rend his heart in twain.

Gwendoline rose and came to his side.

"Bertie," she said, softly, "dear Bertie, do not —oh, do not! or I shall *die!*"

He turned upon her fiercely.

"Go," he said, "leave me at once, or I shall forget my vows, forget my honour, everything. You have a good, kind husband, who loves you; go and try to make him happy, as he deserves—only keep away from *me* as much as you can, and never speak again to me as you have done to-night; it unmans me, and makes me feel a cowardly traitor! Go!"

"Say you forgive me first. Oh, Bertie! why did I ever leave you for *him!*"

She suddenly threw her arms round his neck and clung to him, weeping bitterly.

He suffered her caress for a moment, but made no effort to touch her. Then he said again—

"Go"

"Say you forgive me, I"—

"I forgive you—leave me, for heaven's sake! Don't you see how you are torturing me?"

She loosed her arms, and stood before him humbly, like a child begging forgiveness.

"I am going," she said. "You have conquered. I will try, indeed I will, to be a"—

"Gwendoline, it is time to go home."

Lord Sylvestre's voice was quiet, his manner courteous; but as his wife looked at his white haggard face, she started and turned pale.

"I am coming," she said, hastily.

Then turning to Macgregor, held out her hand, "Good-night," she said.

He took no notice of the gesture, save by a slight inclination of the head, and a coldly spoken reply to her farewell. Then she swept past him, back into the ball-room, her satin gown trailing in shimmering folds behind her, the diamonds shining like a halo round her golden head.

The two men stood facing each other in silence, upon Sylvestre's face was still the look of horrified amazement, which had been there when he spoke to his wife.

"Macgregor," he said, at last, "tell me it isn't true! I must have misunderstood her—she never *could* have said it!"

Bertie lifted his head.

"No, it was *not* true—she didn't mean it—she spoke thoughtlessly, not knowing what she said. Take her home, Sylvestre, and—be kind to her."

"*Kind* to her? Why, man, I love her as the

very light of my life. *Kind* to her?" wonderingly.

"I thought you might have overheard something which would displease you, and then you would be harsh and unforgiving. Sylvestre, I had not meant to tell you, but now it is only fair to do so. Before Lady Sylvestre married you I loved her. I asked her to be my wife. She chose you instead, therefore, of course, she liked you best. Any foolish words you may have overheard to-night, forget and forgive. She did not mean them."

Bertie held out his hand as he spoke. Lord Sylvestre took it in silence.

"You are a good fellow, Macgregor," he said, presently. "No wonder she—she loved you better than me. For though you may try to make me think otherwise, I heard her say it—she would not say what is false, she"—

Here the poor fellow broke down; he turned away with a sigh that was almost a sob; she had deceived him, and he loved her so!

"Be kind to her," was all Bertie's reply. "Good-night."

"Are you not coming, Robert? I am ready,"

said the cold tones of Lady Sylvestre, from the portière.

"Yes, dear, I am coming," and by the tone of his voice, Gwendoline knew that sorrow, not anger, was in his heart.

The guests were beginning to take their departure. Down below sounded the voices of the gondoliers and "servitoré," as they shouted the names of those whose gondolas were coming up in rapid succession. In the distance some wayfarer could be heard singing, in a tipsy voice, the refrain of a drinking song, as he made his perilous way along the labyrinth of streets towards his dwelling,

Still Bertie Macgregor stood upon the balcony wrapped in gloomy thought—fighting sternly with himself the battle which was even now more than half-won. He had been true to himself—

Loyal still for aye.

And now all that remained for him was to *forget*—(he had already *forgiven*); to blot out from his memory, if he could, the recollection of his love for her, who he began somehow to feel was not worthy of the unselfish devotion of the two

hearts she had done her best to bruise and break. He pitied from his soul the man who was her husband, whom she had declared she could never love, whom she treated with open contempt and coldness.

"I'd give all I possess not to have been here to-night. What a fool I was to ask her to dance with me! I ought to have gone away when she came, and saved myself from cowardice, and *her* from her husband's just contempt."

He murmured the words half-aloud. They had scarcely left his lips when he heard the rustle of a woman's dress, and Marie Portici came quickly out on to the balcony.

She did not see Macgregor, as he stood leaning against the casement, half-hidden in the shadow of the curtains which hung within. Her face looked pale and sad, more than ever like the portrait of the bygone Lady Macgregor, Bertie thought, as she stood with clasped hands, and eyes fixed upon the cloudless heavens above her.

"Ah!" she murmured, "how fair is the night, and how dark and lonely my heart! If I had only known—if I had only known!"

She wrung her hands despairingly.

"'Romeo and Juliet,' he said. A Juliet with two Romeo's, and one of them *my* Romeo! Oh, Bertie!"

She leaned her arms upon the stone balustrade, and laid her head upon them. A hand touched her gently on the shoulder—

"Signora."

She started violently, but did not look up.

"I have heard what you said. I could not help it. Do not weep for me, I am not worthy of your tears. When you know my story, you will despise me."

"I could not do that," came the muffled answer, as Marie hid her face still farther from his gaze.

Then gently he told her all—of the murder of his friend, which was laid to his charge; of the love which he had won only to lose again, ere he had well realized his happiness. All his heart he laid bare to the girl who loved him so dearly, whom he had so often wished had been his sister, that he might pour into her sympathising ear the sorrow and misery which had been his in the past.

Mary Macgregor had never been in her brother's confidence—hers was not the nature to invite any one to choose her as a sympathising consoler. Her feelings, if she had any, were hid under a mask of cold worldly indifference, almost bordering on the strong-minded. No, Bertie would never have thought of telling his troubles to *her*.

For some moments after Macgregor had ceased his narrative there was silence. Then Marie came to his side—

"Signor, I am so sorry for you," she said gently. "I would that I could help to clear up this sad mystery; but you must forget this night, and let me be your friend always—will you?"

Macgregor took her hands in his.

"Marie, you must be more than that—you must be my dear sister, to whom I can tell all my troubles, and grumble to my heart's content. You must not be sorry for me, Cara Sorella, for as I said before, I am not worthy of your tender sympathy; only think of me kindly, and believe me that I am deeply grateful. Adieu, my sister."

He touched her forehead gently with his lips,

then with a farewell pressure of the hands he held turned and left her.

Bertie scarcely knew how he reached his rooms, his mind seemed in a whirl. All the events of the last few hours had jumbled themselves together in his brain, till he felt as if it were days ago since he had set off to the ball, and sealed his fate once for all with his own lips, by his self-condemnation and loyalty to the woman he loved.

Well, it was over now; all the dread and longing of the past months. "En avant!" must be his motto from henceforth. "Forward! no looking back mournfully into the past, it comes not back again. Wisely improve the present, it is thine. Go forth to meet the shadowy future without fear, and with a manly heart."

These words of Longfellow's came forcibly to Macgregor's mind as he mounted the stairs to his apartments on the second floor of the quaint old house where he lodged. They seemed to fit themselves to a tune, a kind of march; he began to hum them softly to himself, keeping time as he went along the corridor with every step he took, till he reached his room and threw open the door.

The room was in semi-darkness—a shaded lamp cast a dim light upon the objects in its immediate vicinity, the rest lay in shadow; but Bertie could discern even in the feeble light what made his very heart stand still in horror. Reclining in the arm-chair by the table, his head thrown back against the red cushion, was the silent form of him who had long been numbered amongst the dead—the wraith, the ghostly likeness of *John Raynor!*

As Macgregor stood spell-bound, gazing with terror-stricken eyes at the spectacle, he met those of the apparition fixed inquiringly upon him.

Poor Bertie! All the excitement he had gone through had thoroughly unnerved him. He sprang forward, exclaiming hoarsely—

"What do you want with *me?* I never killed you, though they said I did! Why should you come to me from the dead, as though I were a murderer? I never"—

He staggered a moment, then fell heavily to the ground. For the first time in his life he had fainted away.

CHAPTER XI.

THE PLOT THICKENS.

"WELL, this *is* a rum go!"

The apparition rose slowly from his seat, and crossing the room, bent over the prostrate form of Macgregor, regarding it with sleepy eyes of wonder.

"He must have thought it was my ghost. Fancy me doing the bogey!" with a short laugh. "But," his face suddenly resuming its perplexed look, "what in the world am I to do with him?"

Mr. Raynor looked helplessly round the room in search of restoratives, vague ideas of burnt feathers and vinegar, floating through his mind. What was the Italian for burnt feathers, he wondered; and how could he get at some brandy? The people of the house must all be in bed. He himself had waited so long for his friend's return that he had fallen asleep in his chair. Should he try and rouse the household by ringing the bell to ask for— Ah! that was it—what *could* he ask

for? Cognac might be the Italian for brandy, or— A bright idea struck him, *sal volatile* was the thing! That sounded like Italian, too; he would ask for that. What a pity he did not know the language of the country.

He turned to find the bell, when a deep sigh arrested his footsteps. Macgregor had opened his eyes.

"Where am I; and who are *you?*" he gasped, half-raising himself as he spoke.

"You are in your own apartment, and I am John Raynor, at your service. I say, old fellow, what is the Italian for 'bring some brandy.' I've been racking my brain for the last five minutes."

"Portatemi del cognac," replied Bertie, dreamily, his eyes still fixed in a dazed awe-struck wonder upon his visitor. "But—but—where, in heaven's name, have you come from, and what is the meaning of it all? They said I murdered you. They found your dead body and my stick beside it, which I had killed you with! I must be going mad, or"—

"It was all a mistake; I'm not dead, you see. Come, old fellow, try to sit up, and tell me where

you keep the brandy, or how I'm to get at it; and then when you feel all right again, I'll tell you everything."

"There is some in that side cupboard over there, if you don't mind getting it; my legs are rather shaky yet. I thought you were a ghost, to tell you the truth, and I've been rather upset to-night with one thing and another, it made a coward of me."

Macgregor lifted himself slowly from the floor, and sank into a chair, laughing nervously.

"I didn't mean to startle you," Raynor said, as he took out a decanter and glass from the cupboard, and poured out some brandy for his companion. "I only got here this afternoon, and have been wandering about ever since in search of you. I had nearly given up the search in despair, and was going back to the hotel, when I ran upon Goldie. By Jove! it was as good as a scene in a play to see his face when he caught sight of me! I thought he would have had a fit," laughing. "Well, of course, he knew your address, and offered to come on with me here. We arrived about ten o'clock, but your man said you

had gone to a masked ball, and wouldn't be home for two or three hours. Goldie couldn't wait, he said, so left me; and I made up my mind to wait a short time and then go back to my hotel for the night. I must have fallen asleep, for I was awfully tired; when I awoke it was to find you looking at me as if I were some evil spirit you were tying to exorcise, and then down you went."

Macgregor laughed.

"What an ass you must have thought me; but then, you see, believing you to be dead and buried months ago, it *was* rather startling to come in and find you sitting quietly in a chair in my own room."

"Yes, I'm awfully sorry I was so thoughtless. I ought to have written, or something, first; only I was so anxious to see you, to solve this most extraordinary mystery. I can't make it out. Do you mean to say they actually accused you of murdering me?"

"Yes. Your dead body was found in Wildash Wood. I was the last person seen with you. We were heard quarrelling—my stick was lying beside your dead body, and—*voila tout!*"

"Very strange," John Raynor said, slowly.

"But what has become of you all this time, John? How was it you never heard anything of the *fracas?*" Macgregor asked, curiously.

"Well, that's the oddest part of it. However, I'll tell you my history since we met, and then you can judge for yourself. After I left you that day in the wood, you remember I said I was going to Sandown (to see the fellow who wanted to sell me his yacht) and take the train to London from there. I found the man had been called away to Scotland that morning, to see his father who was dying, and he had left a letter, asking me to postpone our interview for a few days. I, therefore, made up my mind to give up the yacht altogether, and go on to London by the evening train.

"As I was wandering about the town, I met Spofforth. You know Spofforth, the fellow whose father owns that magnificent stud of hunters at Roachampton. Well, he was full of a cruise he was going to take to the North Cape, Nova Zembla, and those places, and asked me if I wouldn't join him. Under any other circumstances, I don't know that I should have gone.

Spofforth isn't one of my sort at all; but I wanted excitement—a sea voyage would divert my mind. I agreed, and that very evening we went on board the 'Miranda,' and steamed away out of sight of land.

"For three weeks or more we cruised about off the western coast of Scotland, among the Hebrides, and in all that time we never saw the ghost of an English newspaper. When at last we did get a *Times*, there was nothing about it, for it must have been between the time of the inquest and trial, and so escaped our notice.

"I was taken ill at Nova Zembla, of a sort of fever, and was laid up for nearly six weeks. Spofforth nursed me like a brick, I can never be grateful enough to him for all his kind care of me at that time. When I was well enough to set off again, we took it into our heads we should like to go to Egypt. So back we came, by way of the North Sea, and made a stay of a week or two at Gibraltar. Whilst we were there Spofforth came to me one day and suggested we should leave the yacht and take a run over to New York in one of the N.L. steamers. Anything for a change. My

restless mind already tired of the sojourn at Gibraltar, and longed for something different. Again we were afloat.

"It was on our arrival at New York that, happening to take up a *Graphic* one day, at the hotel where we put up, I was horrified to find it filled with sketches of the 'Great Grayling Murder Case;' your portrait (a very good one, too) among the number. My own name figuring as that of the murdered man, nearly took my breath away, and for some time I sat staring at the account of the trial, without taking in a word of what I was reading. Then an American, with whom we had scraped an acquaintance, came up to me and began to talk about it. He had read it from the beginning, he said, and was sorry for the poor fellow who had been tried for the murder. Then he told me how you had got off, and that he had heard from some one he met, who was an acquaintance of yours, of your having accepted some post in Venice. He was awfully excited when I told him I was the murdered man, and I became quite a lion for the time being. Of course, I made all haste to get back to Europe, and, as

I tell you, got here this afternoon, or rather *yesterday* afternoon, I ought to say now, for, by Jove!" looking at his watch, "it's nearly five o'clock in the morning!"

"Never mind, I must hear it all; and I can give you a shake down. I'm awfully glad, old fellow, to see you again. I don't know when I've felt anything so much as I did your supposed death."

And Macgregor held out his hand, earnest gladness in every tone of his voice.

Raynor grasped it eagerly.

"My dear old friend, I almost feel as though you ought to hate me for being the cause of so much misfortune to you; but now, believe me, I shall leave no stone unturned to clear up the matter. We must set off for England at once. I have not communicated with any one, so we can go and take them all by surprise. Will you come?"

"Gladly. It seems like a dream having you sitting by me again, old fellow; I can't half realize it yet. By Jove! how glad everybody will be!"

"Is *she*—is Janet married yet?" came the question, in a low, hesitating tone.

"No; and has refused a marquis for your sake, much to her mother's disgust."

"Bless her!" said John Raynor, fervently.

"The Sylvestres are in Venice," Macgregor remarked, after a pause; "I met them at the ball."

"Indeed," was all the reply, but Raynor looked keenly at his friend. This then was what had "upset him," no doubt.

"Macgregor, the next question is, who was the man who was murdered?" he went on presently. "Do you know, I am certain it was the fellow I told you about, whom I picked up on the road that night and gave a night's lodging to. He disappeared the next morning, you remember, taking with him my watch and chain, and wearing my clothes. He said he was coming back to breakfast, or I shouldn't have let him had them. If only I had told Mrs. Dickson, all might have been cleared up; but I knew she would only go on at me for being such a fool as to trust a stranger. Do you know, Macgregor, I feel as sure as if I had been there to see it, that I know who murdered that man!"

Macgregor looked up.

"Who?" he said, wonderingly.

"Robertson, the Grayling schoolmaster."

Bertie started to his feet.

"Impossible! Why, the villain gave evidence against me at the trial."

"Well, that may be; but I can't help thinking of that poor creature's terror of him. He seemed to go in mortal fear that Robertson would come and demand that he should be delivered up to him. He said that Gresham, as he called him, would"—

"*Who?*"

Bertie almost shouted the word, grasping John Raynor's arm.

"Gresham; at least, I think that was the name—Gilbert Gresham. He was his half-brother, he said; but why he should have quarrelled with him I couldn't discover."

"Raynor, why on earth didn't you tell me all this before?"

Mr. Raynor lifted his eyebrows.

"My dear fellow, I thought I *had* mentioned the circumstance to you; but my mind was so full of another subject, I forgot everything else," he said, apologetically.

"They have buried him in the Raynor vault," said Macgregor, as though following out a train of thought in his own mind.

"Very cool, I must say," replied Raynor, in an injured tone. "However, *I* don't mind; poor devil, he must have been buried somewhere."

"Yes, it was Lewis Rolton," Macgregor said, half to himself. "I must see Goldie at once."

"What has Goldie to do with it?"

"Everything. We have found the man we have been looking for these six months and more."

And then Macgregor told his friend of the dishonoured bill, of his fruitless search for the missing officer; of the discovery that Lewis Rolton was connected with the death of the Prima Donna, her husband having owned to her that he murdered him out of revenge.

And Gilbert Gresham, the man whom Goldie had taken a vow to find and bring to justice, was Robertson, his enemy; the false witness, who had ruined his case by his vile innuendos. Macgregor clenched his fists as he thought of the wrong he had suffered at the hands of him, who should have been standing where *he* had stood, at the bar

of justice, and paid the penalty of a felon's death, which death he (Macgregor) had so narrowly escaped.

There was no going to bed for either of the two friends. They sat talking till the sun was high in the heavens, and the sounds of newly-awakened life became audible in the streets below. Then Macgregor ordered baths and breakfast; and after another long confab over their meal, the two men set off to find Ralph Goldie and concert with him the best mode of proceeding with regard to Gresham, who must, of course, be secured at once.

Mr. Goldie sat at his late breakfast, reading his letters, when the two friends entered his apartment. He greeted them warmly.

"Never had such a shock in the whole of my life," he said, laughing. "Thought I had taken leave of my senses, and was in for brain fever, when I saw Raynor walking along in front of me —or that it was a warning to me of approaching death. I don't want to die just yet, and it startled me."

He glanced at a letter which lay on the table

beside him—a letter written in a clear, woman's hand. Macgregor saw the look.

"A billet doux, old man?" he asked, with a look of amazement.

"Yes, from Olive," calmly.

"Humph."

"I've told John, so it's no secret," Goldie said, half defiantly. "Shut up, Macgregor; it's no concern of yours."

"It is very much, considering I thought of proposing to the lady myself."

"She wouldn't have had you."

"I ask the question, as old mother Pipkin at the Post Office used to say. However, Goldie, I have not come here to quarrel over your love affairs, but to tell you of an important discovery we have made; now listen."

CHAPTER XII.

STRANGERS YET.

THE morning sun was shining brightly upon the pretty garden of the Villa Riletto—upon its gay parterres of geraniums and calceolarias, making them look like tongues of flame amid the green of the grass and foliage; upon the masses of pink, red, and creamy roses, which trailed along the balustrades of the terrace, and upon the white dress and golden head of Lady Sylvestre, as she walked backwards and forwards, deep in thought.

Her face was flushed with some undefined emotion, her hands were tightly clasped in front of her; and when she lifted her eyes to the cloudless sky above, they were full of tears—tears of shame and vain regret.

Yes, *she*, the proud queen of society, whose every action was noted and admired, whose every word was law; who had thought no position could be too high for her; who had expected the world to fall at her feet and pay her homage, was

bowed to the very earth in shame and confusion of face. She had humbled herself in the eyes of the man she loved, and in the eyes of the husband who loved *her*. And for what? To be told to go home and try to be a good wife to that husband, and never to let him whom she had tortured—yes, *tortured* (that was what he said)—see her face again!

Not one word had her husband spoken to her yet of the occurrence of last night, but by his manner Gwendoline knew that the blow had fallen heavily. He was still all gentle courtesy to her; but the loving word, the tender caresses which, in spite of herself, she had learnt to tolerate, if not reciprocate, were no longer there—he seemed anxious to avoid even looking at her.

"Mene, mene, tekel upharsin," the handwriting on the wall, seemed to rise before her eyes in letters of fire. Had God numbered her kingdom and finished it? Would her husband give her up, and send her from him? She deserved it. She had been weighed in the balance and found wanting—wanting in wifely love to the man who would have given all he had to please her; wanting in

honour, in feeling, and in truth. Truly did she deserve that her kingdom should be taken from her, and she cast away from her high estate, from her husband's heart, to live out a lonely life of humiliation and repentance, till death put an end to her probation.

Yes, she was a miserable woman, this lovely creature, who looked like one of Greuze's saints in her white robes, with the halo of sunlight round her golden head. The old Italian gardener, as he passed now and then up the path towards the house, thought that surely the Blessed Virgin Mother must have looked just so, when the angel Gabriel came to her with the heavenly message.

But old Pedro little knew how wretched was the heart which beat beneath the fair exterior, and that his lovely mistress would have given all she possessed to change places even with *him* for one short hour, that she might not know what it was to feel humbled in the dust by the condemnation of those she loved.

"Gwendoline, will you come in for a moment; I want to speak to you?"

Lord Sylvestre had come to the open window of

the salon, from which a flight of steps led to the garden. He spoke coldly, with none of his usual tenderness of manner. His wife noticed it, and a secret pang of something like sorrow touched her heart. She bent her head in answer to his request, and moved towards him, stopping on her way to gather some roses in her path, as though to delay as long as possible the dreaded *something* which she knew was coming.

Her husband stood and watched her, his eyes taking in every detail of her beauty. The downcast eyes, with their long curling lashes, the sweet child-like mouth, which had now the slight droop at the corners that made its expression so pathetic. Never had he really known how much he loved her till now, when for the first time he discovered that she had deceived him.

"Yes?" she said enquiringly, when they stood together within the pretty room where a few weeks before that other husband and wife had met and parted. Gwendoline had heard the sad story, perhaps she was thinking of it now as she stood waiting for Lord Sylvestre to speak. He did not seem to be in a hurry to begin, but remained at

the open window, his eyes fixed upon the distant sunlit landscape.

Lady Sylvestre took a vase from the table, and began to arrange her roses in it with formal precision, little heeding in reality what she was doing.

"Gwendoline, when you married me, did you care for Macgregor?"

She looked up quickly, and her hand catching in the frail glass vase, turned it over with a crash upon the floor, breaking it in a thousand pieces.

Lord Sylvestre moved quickly to her side, and began to pick up the roses which lay scattered on the ground.

"Have you cut yourself?" he asked hastily, as she looked at her hand with a slight exclamation of pain.

"A little; it is nothing," taking out her pocket-handkerchief and binding it round the injured member.

At any other time her husband would have overwhelmed her with sympathy and tender condolence, now he said not a word, another proof, Gwendoline knew, that he had done with her for ever.

"You have not answered my question," he said after a pause, as he laid the roses on the table, and went back to the window.

"Why do you ask me?" she said slowly.

"Because I wish to hear from your own lips that you have deceived me," was the cold reply.

"I have not deceived you. I told you I had no love to give you when first you asked me to marry you. I said I would try to be a good wife to you, and you said you were content with that."

"Yes, but I thought you only meant that you did not love me *then*, and I felt sure that in time I could gain your affection, that you *must* love me when you were my wife. I never knew you cared for someone else, or I should hardly have entered the lists."

He spoke vehemently, with a touch of sarcasm Gwendoline had never heard from him before.

"You never asked me," she faltered.

"I should not have thought of so insulting you. You accepted me, there was no hesitation in your manner; the only thing you *did* say was that you did not love me. Had you refused me, I might

have asked you whether love for another had prompted your rejection. And to think that for nearly a year I have lived in this fool's paradise, only to be rudely awakened at the last. Oh, Gwen, my darling, how could you do it?"

He sank into a chair, and covered his face with his hands. Lady Sylvestre made a step forward, and tried to speak; he stopped her.

"No, don't come near me, dont't touch me, or I shall lose the courage to say what I have to say. Henceforth we must be as strangers, each going our own way. *You* will not care, for you do not love me; but I—oh, heaven!"

A deep tearless sob came with the words, the sob of a man in his great agony.

It had come then. Her kingdom was going from her, her husband had cast her off.

"Robert!" she wailed, "Oh, Robert! don't say such hard things to me; it was all mamma's fault, she"—

"Hush!" Lord Sylvestre lifted his white face, and spoke sternly, peremptorily. "You need make no excuses, it will only make matters worse. Your mother could not force you to marry me

against your will, especially if you had told her you loved Macgregor. Did you tell her?"

"No."

"Gwendoline, what did you marry me for?"

Lady Sylvestre was strewing the floor all round her with different coloured rose leaves. She continued her occupation with unabating energy, but without speaking. Why was it that she could not tell him the truth? At one time she would not have minded saying to his face that it was his title and wealth which had been the tempting bait, but somehow now the words would not come. He had been so good and kind to her, how could she wound him still further?

"I do not know," she whispered, seeing that he was waiting for an answer.

"Was it my money and title which attracted you? Oh, Gwen, don't tell me it was *that* you married me for! Anything but that!"

He came a step towards her, entreaty in his voice, love in his eyes.

There was no answer.

"It was true then. He offered you his love, but it was not gilded like mine with gold and

earthly grandeur, so you cast it aside, preferring that which could bestow upon you what you coveted. Well, I hope you are satisfied. You have deceived us both, and broken two hearts—his and mine. It is such women as *you*, Gwendoline, who send men to perdition, false, cruel, deceitful women like you. Go, leave me, before I *hate* you!"

He turned from her, an expression of angry disgust upon his face. Gwendoline took refuge in woman's last resource, tears, and for some moments sobbed convulsively.

"I have done you no harm!" she cried; "I told you I would be a good wife to you; have I not kept my word? What more do you want?"

"Your whole heart, your undivided love, which is mine by right, as your husband. Do you think I have not noticed your scarcely concealed contempt, your repugnance to my very touch? I have done so, and now that I understand it all, I wonder how I could have borne it in silence."

"You should find fault with mamma, not me; she has always dinned it into my ears that I must

marry riches and position. I have been taught to consider 'love in a cottage' as the delusion of idiots. I cannot help it if I have never known better."

Gwendoline spoke petulantly, her usual mode of procedure when worsted in an argument.

"Your better nature might have taught you how wicked it was to deceive one who loved you as I did," he replied sternly. "As I told you, it is useless making excuses of that sort. Now what I want to say is, that of course we cannot any longer continue as we have done; we are better apart."

He spoke calmly, not a trace of his recent emotion visible in face or manner.

Gwendoline looked at him with startled eyes.

"Robert!" she gasped, "you will not send me away?"

"There will not be much *sending* required," sarcastically. "I should think you would be only too glad to leave a husband you hate and despise."

"I do not hate you," softly.

"Something very like it."

"It will look so bad to the world," Lady Sylvestre began, trying to find another excuse.

Her husband laughed bitterly.

"You forget," he said, "*I* have a position to keep up as well as *you*. There shall be no scandal. No gossiping lips shall talk us over. I have made all arrangements. I am going to Australia, to see an uncle of mine who is old and ailing. I cannot take you with me. Therefore you will go back to your mother, or live at Deanscourt; *that* has been done up for you by now."

Again a pang of regret crossed Gwendoline's heart as she remembered the letter of instructions which her husband had written to the agent for the carrying out of *her* wishes. Come what might she would not go to Deanscourt.

"I would rather go to Abbots' Home," she said.

"Would you? Then I will take you back to England in a day or two. In the meantime you can write and prepare them for your coming."

"Very well."

Lady Sylvestre spoke indifferently. She felt rather as if she were being made a martyr of.

"If you have nothing more to say to me, I will go back to the garden," she said, after a pause.

"I have nothing more to say to you."

Lord Sylvestre sat down at the table, and drew writing materials towards him. His wife swept past him out into the sunshine, leaving him to the dark and bitter thoughts which were filling his heart. Once she looked back at him, but he did not lift his head. The time for confidence was past; he had heard her bemoaning her fate with her own lips in having left Macgregor for *him*. She had deceived him; let her go.

Up and down the terrace Lady Sylvestre paced slowly, the cloud upon her brow giving evidence of the storm which raged within. Not for worlds would she have had things come to this pass; it was bad enough to have made her husband angry and vexed with her, but to be sent back again to her father's house! Gwendoline stamped her foot in the magnitude of her wrath. She was angry with everybody, with her husband for having overheard her foolish words last night, with Macgregor for having called them forth, with her mother, because if it had not been for her am-

bitious views and teaching, her daughters might have had different ideas about the fitness of marrying for the sake of position only, when the love of a lifetime was given to another. And above all Gwendoline was angry with herself for not having been more guarded in her words and actions. Bertie's loyalty had saved her from *herself*, and she knew it; yet her only feeling towards him now was anger and disappointment. Voices came to her ear from the salon above. Lady Sylvestre went to the foot of the steps to listen. Who could have come so early to see them, she wondered. She heard her husband's voice speaking glad words of welcome to somebody, and then other tones chimed in, those of Ralph Goldie and Bertie Macgregor.

"What can *he* want here?" she murmured, her thoughts going back to last night, and the voice speaking its bitter words of entreaty and condemnation. "Can he have come to?—" But no, he was too honourable to betray her further.

She went up the steps slowly, a feeling of irrepressible curiosity guiding her in the direction of the voices. She lifted the curtain which hung

before the window and entered the room. The voices suddenly ceased. A gentleman, who stood with his back to her, turned hastily round, and Lady Sylvestre found herself face to face with the man whom Macgregor was supposed to have murdered—*John Raynor!*

A cry escaped her lips, she looked round upon the faces of the other three men, as though stupified with wondering amazement. Lord Sylvestre spoke—

"John Raynor has come back to us, Gwendoline. He was not murdered, but has been abroad all this time; so that he never heard anything of that terrible affair till a short time ago. I have been bidding him welcome; will you not do the same?"

In spite of Lady Sylvestre's astonishment and half-incredulous wonder, she could not help noticing the difference in her husband's manner of addressing her—all the tenderness was gone, courtesy alone remained. She wondered if Macgregor noticed it too, and glanced swiftly at him; but he was apparently deeply engrossed in the study of a paper-knife which he was

twirling about in his fingers. Gwendoline turned to Mr. Raynor—

"I am *very* glad," she began, earnestly; "but—but—I cannot understand it; and, oh, *why* didn't you come back before?"

"Because, as Lord Sylvestre told you, I never knew anything about it. You do not suppose I should have let Macgregor suffer on my account if I could have helped it, Lady Sylvestre?" somewhat coldly.

"I was thinking of Janet," she replied, softly, while the colour mounted to her forehead at the mention of Bertie. "She has felt your supposed death so much; she nearly died at one time. How glad she will be to see you once more. We must break it to her very gently."

"Raynor will have to break it to her himself, I think—and joy never kills," said Lord Sylvestre; but he spoke to the young Squire.

John Raynor did not answer. He wondered if he should be ordered off the premises a second time when he made his appearance at Abbotts' Home. This time, however, he would not go.

Gwendoline did not stay to hear the discussion

as to Robertson's approaching capture and conviction—a subject which had engrossed her husband and his visitors before her entrance, and which was now resumed with unabated interest. It did not concern *her* to hear about other people's delinquencies. With a stately inclination of the head to Ralph Goldie, who sprang forward to open the door for her, she swept past him from the room, and went upstairs to write her letter to her mother.

CHAPTER XIII.

OUT OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

"WHERE are you going, mamma?"

Auriol Mervyn paused, tennis racket in hand, as her mother came across the lawn from the house, arrayed in the gorgeous costume which announced her intention of making a round of afternoon calls. Her face wore its company smile, in preparation for the coming visits, as she drew on her gloves with careful precision, and glanced complacently round the tennis ground.

An exciting and well-matched game had been going on, between Mildred and her lover on the one side, and Auriol and Constance Leslie on the other. Watching the players with breathless interest were Mabel and Major Ponsonby; the latter gazing with admiring eyes at his lady-love, as she darted hither and thither over the lawn, utterly oblivious to the intense heat of the day, or the fact that Auriol let her do all the running after missing balls, and extra forcible "serves," while she herself looked on in calm equanimity.

"I am going to Sandown to call on Lady Macgregor. They are staying there, and she may have heard news of Gwendoline and Robert from her son. I shall be back very soon," Mrs. Mervyn said, in answer to Auriol's question.

"Is Janet going with you, mamma?"

It was Mildred who spoke now. She came up to Mrs. Mervyn's side, and asked the question in a low and rather anxious tone.

Mrs. Mervyn looked vexed.

"No; at the last moment she has changed her mind; says she has a headache. I really wish she would get over this absurd idea of never going anywhere. She will develope into a regular recluse," crossly.

"Janet is not well to-day, mother, I am sure; she looked so pale at luncheon. I wish we could do something for her. She seems worse since she came back from London," Mildred said, sadly.

"It is all because she will keep harping upon that wretched affair last year. I am quite tired of it. If you could only get her to think of something or somebody else besides John Raynor,

you would be doing her the greatest service any one *can* do."

"Janet will never think of any one else, I am sure, mamma. I should be the same if anything happened to Guy," softly.

"There is not much likelihood of anything happening to HIM, that I can see," retorted her mother, snappishly, glancing wrathfully at the tall figure in white flannels standing at the opposite end of the lawn.

"No, indeed, bless his heart!" Mildred said, effusively. "He looks a *duck* in tennis costume."

"Really, Mildred, you are so very *common* in your ideas. Fancy calling any man a *duck!*" indignantly.

"I beg your pardon, mamma; I forgot I was speaking to *you*."

Mildred walked away, leaving her mother somewhat astonished. Yet Mrs. Mervyn could not but be aware that her daughters were gradually slipping away from her control, and that Mildred had on more than one occasion seen fit to prefer Guy Wincombe's opinion to hers.

"Shall I go with you, mamma?"

Auriol's voice broke in upon her mother's not very pleasant meditations.

"Well, I came out here to ask one of you to go; but, really, you are so very independent that I never know whether you will condescend to do as I ask or not," Mrs. Mervyn said, huffily.

"Dear mamma, we are always ready to do as you wish," Auriol replied, gently. "I will go and get my gloves; is the carriage round?"

"Yes; and tell Janet you are going."

Auriol was soon ready, but lingered a moment to hear a dolorous story of Winnie's and Binnie's as to the fate of a bullfinch which they set great store by, and which had just been discovered dead in its cage. Winnie's tears were flowing fast, whilst Binnie, more composed, but sorrowing too, told the tale.

"We will try and get another, dear," Auriol said, consolingly. "There are plenty of others to be had."

"That's what Miss Dufferin says," said Binnie; "but Winnie and I don't want a new one—we loved Bijou, and we shall *never* love another!"

"The children are firm on that point," Miss

Dufferin said. "They have made up their minds that nobody shall supersede Bijou in their regard."

"They are quite right," and Auriol stooped to kiss the tearful faces, thinking to herself that if such sentiments were but fostered, there would be no fear for the future of her little sisters.

Janet sat by the window of her room, her eyes closed, suffering plainly written on the pale face. She looked up wearily as Auriol entered.

"I am going with mamma, Jan," the latter said. "Are you better, dear?"

"No," sadly; "I shall never be better."

Auriol smoothed back the curly rings of hair from her sister's forehead, and sighed.

"I am so sorry for you, Janet," she said, softly.

"Thank you, dear; but don't trouble about me. I sometimes think it would be better if I were to die."

"Janet, don't talk so. I wish you wouldn't—it—it—makes me so unhappy!" and Auriol, to her sister's astonishment, suddenly burst into tears.

"Hush, Joe! please don't. You will make me cry too, if you do."

Auriol dried her tears quickly.

"I can't help it, Janet; everything is so very unfortunate for us. Mamma is angry with me, I know, for not marrying Lord Danvers, and I couldn't, while"—

She did not finish the sentence, but kissing her sister hurried from the room.

The rest of the afternoon passed quickly away, and the first dinner-bell rang its sonorous summons through the house, yet the carriage had not returned, and Thomas began to wonder if "missus" were really going to leave the grand preparations for a dinner party, to his own and Payn's supervision. Such a thing had never happened before within his recollection, and his rubicund countenance literally beamed with gratification at the thought of his coming triumph.

Alas! for his bright anticipations. The roll of carriage wheels became audible outside, they suddenly stopped, and Thomas opened the door to admit his master and mistress, aud Miss Auriol. Mrs. Mervyn was in a bad temper. Well did Thomas know the peculiar rustle of the dress, the trembling of the roses in her bonnet.

She walked straight into the dining-room, where the table was laid for dinner, glittering with plate and glass, and bright with flowers in tall silver epergnes.

"This will not do at all," she said, crossly, eyeing the arrangement with marked disapproval. "You have put on the wrong glasses, those with the fern leaves were what I chose this morning, and the table cloth is not the one I said I would have used. Take everything off again."

With a mental "swear," for which he might, surely, have been excused, the unfortunate Thomas proceeded to obey his mistress's orders. She stood by and watched him, with lowering brows and distracting fault-findings, till a loud ring at the bell roused her to a sense of the lateness of the hour, and she hurried off to dress.

"Well I'm blowd!" ejaculated Thomas, as his mistress disappeared up the staircase. "She's just for all the world like one o' them crackers wot you buys o' Guy Foxes night. You jest give 'em a touch, an' away they fizzes, bang! bang! bang! an hall comes to nothin' after all! Missus aughter been a navvy's wife, that's

what *she* aughter bin, an' then ne'd ha give her what for—blest if 'e wouldn't!"

Which sage reflection seemed to afford Thomas much gratification, for he proceeded with his arduous task, almost with a smile of complacency, and even forebore to complain in the servants' hall, as was his nightly custom of the ways of the gentry in general, and of his mistress in particular.

"Janet, do let Annette go to Auriol for a minute, she is so late, and mamma wanted nurse. They never got back till ten minutes ago—so tiresome! Are you ready?"

Mildred came into her sister's room, drawing on a pair of pink mittens, and looking decidedly put out.

"Certainly; go at once, Annette. How nice you look, Tom. Is that another of your London costumes?"

"What, this old thing? I hate it, and it is worn out, but Guy likes me in pink, so I put it on to please him. I am certain Joe won't be ready or mamma either, and I do so hate receiving people!"

The cloud upon the pretty face deepened, Janet sighed. Her sister's engagement always recalled to her her own bitter sorrow. How nice it would have been to have had to think of what John would like to see her in, to study his wishes and tastes in all she did.

"Aren't you going to wear any colour, Jan? You want something dreadfully, to relieve that dead white. Let me get you a crimson rose or a piece of scarlet geranium, do dear!"

"No, thanks; I like myself best as I am. Flowers always remind me of what I want to forget."

She turned away to the dressing-table, and began to gather up her fan and pocket handkerchief in nervous haste.

"I will go and see if mamma wants anything before I go downstairs," she added, as she left the room.

Mildred walked up to the long pier glass, turning herself round to get a better view of her long sweeping skirts.

"Humph! Guy is right, pink certainly *is* my colour. This is the gown I had on when he pro-

posed to me. How happy I was that night! how happy I am now. If only Janet could"—

Mildred's half uttered soliloquy was brought to a sudden termination by the entrance of Auriol.

"Is Janet here?" she asked, glancing round the room.

Her face was pale, the blue eyes full of startled fear.

"No, she has gone to mamma; what do you want her for, is anything the matter, Joe?"

Auriol came up to the glass and stood beside her sister for some moments in silence. A pretty picture they made, a study in blue and pink. Mildred looked at their reflection, and said with a laugh—

"You look as if you had seen a ghost, Joe—and how like Gwen you get—her very image, only smaller."

"Do I?" with a little dreary smile. "Tom," coming closer and speaking in an awestruck tone, "What do you think Annette has been saying! She says John Raynor's ghost is walking. Old Perry saw it when he was coming down the

wood, and he was so frightened he had a sort of fit."

"John Raynor's ghost?" echoed Mildred, in a frightened tone. "Joe, it *couldn't* have been!"

"Perry says it was. He saw him quite distinctly walking round the place where he was murdered."

"Is Perry here now?"

The girl started. Close beside them was Janet, her face white as the gown she wore, her eyes wide open like a person walking in her sleep.

"Is he here now?" she repeated, as her sisters stood looking at her in dumb amazement.

Where had she come from? How much had she heard?

"I daresay it was a mistake, dear. Old Perry is half blind, you know, and doesn't know one person from another; besides I did not mean you to hear of it," Auriol said, apologetically.

"What does it matter my hearing of it? Nothing can make me think more of him than I think now," Janet replied, sadly. "I should like to see Perry, where is he?"

"Gone, long ago, Annette said, he looked quite

dazed and wild with fright. He knew the young Squire at once, he said."

Auriol forgot her former resolves of keeping the matter a secret from Janet, and became once more communicative.

"It was his ghost, he was certain."

"If you please, Miss Mervyn, would you hurry, your mamma says; she has gone down, and the company is acoming fast now."

"Annette! Annette! come here, we"—

But Annette had disappeared, and was deaf to the young mistresses' calls to her to stop. No doubt she feared Mrs. Mervyn's just anger at her having dared to broach the forbidden subject in the hearing of the young ladies.

"We had better go on, or mamma will be angry. What happened while you were out to vex her, Joe?" Mildred said, as the sisters went downstairs together.

"I don't know, unless it was something in Gwen's letter. We found one from her at the post office. After mamma had read it, she seemed quite angry, and when I asked her for it she said there was no news in it that would in-

terest me, except that Gwen is coming home, and Robert thinks of going to Australia. Papa met us in Sandown, he read the letter and seemed quite thunderstruck at something in it. He cried out, 'Good gracious! it can't be true!' and sat staring at mamma till she said, 'Don't say anything about it, there must be some mistake.' There was nothing more said before me. Don't you hate a mystery?"

But the drawing-room door was opened, and Auriol never heard her sister's answer.

The dinner to-night was rather a failure. Both host and hostess seemed to be thinking of something else. The latter's company smile, too, scarcely hid the ill-temper which lay under the surface, and she tried in vain to appear cheerful and at ease, as she listened to old Squire Hornbury's long rigmarole about his crops, delivered at the top of a loud voice, which made the glasses ring again.

At last it was over. The signal was given, the ladies rose, and Janet Mervyn felt as if the relief from her companion's vapid conversation was such, that she could have screamed aloud.

Twilight was deepened into night. Already dark shadows showed where the thick foliage of the trees hung over the lawn, making the bright moonlight which illuminated the rest of the old garden at Abbott's Home brighter still by contrast.

> Heaven's ebon vault,
> Studded with stars, unutterably bright,
> Thro' which the moon's unclouded grandeur rolls,
> Seems like a canopy, which love has spread
> To curtain her sleeping world.

Janet Mervyn stood outside the open French window, gazing at the fair prospect before her. The moon looked down in kindly sympathy upon the slender white-robed form. A shawl was thrown over her head, making her look like Raphael's Madonna —too fair almost and fragile for a being of earth.

In the drawing-room Olive Leslie was singing, and the words of the song seemed to go with the thoughts which filled Janet Mervyn's heart.

> Love, the night falls dreary,
> Come ere the sun-light flies,
> Hearts that wait grow weary,
> Love that slumbers dies.

Ah! *her* love would never slumber, nor die. The

night had indeed fallen dreary for her. Her love would never come to her with the sunlight shining on his head. If only she might be permitted to see his spirit, just once, to have one more glimpse of the face she had loved so well! But, no, it would never be; he would not answer her, called she ever so loudly and entreatingly.

Love the night falls dreary,
Come ere the sunlight flies.

The words seemed to awaken all the sorrow which for months had been crushing her to the earth. She stretched out her arms to the moonlit night, calling faintly—

"John! John! Oh, my love! come back to me!"

"My darling, I am here!"

His voice! his shape! Janet could see him distinctly standing a little way off, at the end of the verandah; his spirit had come to her then kind and merciful heaven, to hear and answer her prayer! to let her look on him once more, even though she might not touch him. Her eyes were growing dim, or he was vanishing from her sight! She would go a little nearer to him, that she

might see him better, and take in every detail of the beloved features!

With a strange eagerness, which had in it nothing of fear, Janet made her way with tottering footsteps towards the figure—it still remained motionless, as before, regarding her with tender, loving eyes.

"Janet," said the well-remembered voice, "I am no spirit, but a living reality; come to me, my love!"

There was a little cry, John Raynor sprang forward and clasped the white-robed figure in his arms. Who shall describe that meeting? Out of the very grave itself, he had come back to her. She felt the clasp of his arms about her, his kisses on her lips. Could joy have killed, then surely would Janet Mervyn, this very night, have been numbered among the dead.

Standing upon the moonlit verandah, with his arms around her, her hand clasped in his, John Raynor told Janet the history of his long absence; of the discovery of the real murderer and his victim; while she listened as one in a dream, doubting yet the reality of the too sweet present.

"And I have wanted you so, John," she said, when she had heard all. "I thought it was your spirit which had come in answer to my call, and I hoped it might be a warning that I should soon go to join you."

"The warning will come true, my dearest. Nothing shall ever part us again, for I mean to carry you off forthwith. I did not think I should have even a glimpse of my love to-night, for when Macgregor and I arrived here, the man said you had a dinner party, so Macgregor went off home again, while I made my way round here, where I knew, by the sounds of singing which reached me so distinctly that the windows must be open. I could not go away till to-morrow, as Bertie suggested, without one glimpse of you. Then I caught sight of you on the verandah, and heard you call to me. My darling! I could not resist the impulse to answer, but having done so, I was frightened at the effect which the sound of my voice might have upon you, and waited to see what you would do."

"I came as quickly as I could. I was afraid you would vanish again. Oh, Jack!" with a happy

little laugh, "how nice it is to have you again! Does mamma know?"

"I do not know; Lady Sylvestre wrote to her, she may have got the letter by this time."

And Janet somehow felt that her mother had done so.

CHAPTER XIV.

"HER ROSE IN ASHES."

SURELY never were heroes returning from the glorious victories of the battle field accorded a more rapturous and hearty welcome than were the young Squire of Horsham Dale and the man who had been accused of his murder.

Bonfires blazed upon the hill-tops, flags waved in the breeze from the old church tower and the principal residences in the neighbourhood. Deputations of congratulation came from every village and town, and on all sides were rejoicings and heartfelt gladness.

At the Hall, whither Sir Randolph and Lady Macgregor had returned, upon hearing the good news of their son's entire and undisputed right to take his place once more in the world as a gallant soldier and honourable gentleman, the rejoicing was no less universal than at the Folly, where poor Mrs. Dickson was flying hither and thither, crying and laughing and scolding the servants by

turns, in the fulness of her happiness at her dear master's return. Poor old Donald, who ever since Captain Macgregor's misfortunes had been weak and ailing, always bemoaning his fate for having inadvertently made matters worse for him, and railing at "Thae fules o' jury," seemed to be suddenly restored to health and activity. He routed out every piece of plate the house contained, and superintended the counting of it by the unfortunate Robert, to whom he at the same time delivered a long lecture upon the sin of trusting to the decrees of men, and those of a judge and jury in particular.

"Hoot mon!" he exclaimed, waving his inventory theatrically in the air, "it wadna been a scrop o' guid thae jury finding any ither vaerdict, for it was as clear as thot ye're coontin' all thae spunes wrang, thot thae yoong laird was innocent! Her kenned it all along, her ain sel! Thae Lord be praised for a' His maercies!" reverently raising his eyes.

In all the leading papers and periodicals of the day, long articles were devoted to the extraordinary "Case of Mistaken Identity" in the recent

murder at Grayling, and many were the "I told you so's" therein expressed. Everybody seemed from the very beginning to have been quite certain as to Captain Macgregor's innocence of the crime imputed to him, and to have one and all regarded him in the light of a martyr. The very incidents which at one time had been put forward as proofs of his guilt, were now described as bearing undoubted witness in his favour, and even the jury, who after the trial were almost universally censured for their lenient verdict, now appeared in exalted terms as veritable oracles; in short, everybody seemed to vie with each other in showing their gladness at the clearing up of the mystery which had made two homes desolate, and nearly broken as many faithful hearts.

Only one person, among all who flocked to offer their congratulations, and express their pleasure at the return of John Raynor in the flesh, drew back from uttering any words of rejoicing at the event. Mrs. Mervyn felt that it would be out of her power to repress the disappointment she felt at the reappearance of the man whom she had last parted from in anger, and whom she still

regarded as the bane of her daughter's future prospects.

A coldly-spoken welcome she had certainly given him, when on that glad evening Janet had brought into the presence of the amazed and bewildered guests, the young Squire of Horsham Dale, whom everyone believed to be now sleeping his last sleep in the family vault of the Raynors; but John Raynor knew that the sentence, so carefully chosen and calmly delivered, had no sincerity in it, and his heart insensibly hardened against this woman, whom he held to be the primary cause of the bitter mistake which had been made.

Janet Mervyn almost forgot her former grief and despair in the happiness of the present. The colour returned to her cheeks, the smile to her lips; she felt that all her past sufferings were as nothing now in the joy of the present. Her sisters, glad for *her* sake, no longer felt the necessity for restraining their youthful flow of spirits before her, while even Miss Dufferin, whose sojourn at Abbott's Home was now drawing to a close, joined in the general feeling of happiness in the bright future.

Mrs. Mervyn alone was silent. Her face bore the storm clouds, which ere long would burst, and woe betide the unfortunate person who should be the first to draw down her wrath upon his offending head.

The return of Lady Sylvestre to Abbott's Home caused some conjecture and surprise in the mind of the world at large, but upon Lord Sylvestre's public announcement of the fact that he was going to Australia to see a sick relative, and that the sea voyage was considered to be undesirable for his wife, who was a bad sailor, public opinion and public scandal were silenced and the whole affair came to be regarded as the most natural arrangement possible.

Mrs. Mervyn could not altogether understand it. Her eldest daughter looked worn and sad, her manner was colder and prouder than ever. Only towards her father and sisters did she ever show anything like warmth or affection; to her mother she was polite and gentle, nothing more. Mrs. Mervyn tried in vain to discover the reason; Gwendoline was silent and reserved. Nor could any questions, be they ever so delicately put (and no-

body was more versed in the art than Mrs. Mervyn), elicit from her any explanation of her altered demeanour. Altogether, in spite of the happiness which had come to Janet, and which extended itself to her sisters, Abbott's Home was not the abode of bliss which it might have been, and all therein assembled felt rather as if they stood on the edge of a volcano, which was shaking and rumbling beneath their feet.

At length, however, the storm burst.

It was a lovely morning towards the end of September. The sun sparkled on the sea, and touched with glorious tints the rich autumn foliage of the trees and hedges. The yellow corn, which had waved its golden ears with every passing breeze, was now falling fast beneath the reaper's scythe, and already the songs of Harvest Home were beginning to be heard throughout the land.

In the morning-room at Abbott's Home were assembled Lady Sylvestre, Auriol, and Mildred, the latter deep in the mysteries of a letter which she was writing to her betrothed. Lady Sylvestre lay back in an easy chair, her hands idly clasped together in her lap, her eyes closed, while

Auriol, with the newspaper in her hands, was occasionally reading out items of news for her sister's benefit, varying the occupation by shaking her foot backwards and forwards for the amusement of a small Persian kitten, which lay on the rug by the open window.

She looked fairer than ever this morning, in her soft, cream-coloured gown, with the sunlight on her golden hair. Most people thought her prettier than Gwendoline, whom she so much resembled, in that her face wore a sweeter, softer expression, the blue eyes were lifted to yours with a look of innocent fearlessness wonderfully captivating, and at times a tender light would come into them, supplying the charm which was wanting in those of her elder sister.

"Do listen, Gwen! Isn't this fun?" she exclaimed, turning her eyes once more to the paper in her hand. "'Petroleum quiet; lard firm and advancing; money easy.' What does it all mean, I wonder?" laughing softly.

"I'm sure I don't know," Lady Sylvestre replied languidly, without opening her eyes, "something to do with the markets I suppose."

"Yes, of course, but I thought lard always *was* firm, and how can petroleum ever be anything else but quiet?"

"It blows up sometimes," Mildred remarked musingly, as she nibbled the top of her pen. "This sort must be warranted free from the vice I should think."

"Well, I shall ask papa at lunch, for it is the funniest thing I ever read. Here is a man who advertises for a footman's place in a nobleman's family. 'References given and required. Cabinet photo can be seen.' There, Gwen, wouldn't you like to give this requiring individual a trial? I *should* like to see him! Why, what is this?" turning over the sheets and running her eyes down the column. "'Grand Regimental Dinner to Captain Macgregor, of the —th Highlanders. Last evening the officers of the —th Regiment of Highlanders gave a banquet to their former brother officer, Captain Macgregor, whose unfortunate arrest some months ago for the murder of Mr. John Raynor, of Horsham Dale, Isle of Wight, caused such a stir throughout England. After the usual toasts had been drunk, Colonel

Delorme, in the name of the regiment, congratulated the gallant Captain upon the fortunate clearing up of the mystery, which had caused so much distress and anxiety to his friends on his behalf, and expressed a hope that they should soon hear that he had again resumed that noble profession for which he was so eminently fitted.'"

Auriol read the paragraph to the end, then laid the paper down, and there was silence, broken only by the scratch, scratch of Mildred's pen.

"He is going into the army again then," Auriol said reflectively, playing an impromptu waltz upon the paper with her fingers.

"Is he?" Gwendoline replied indifferently.

"I am very glad; aren't *you*, Gwen?" Auriol went on, holding out her foot to the tender mercies of the kitten, who clawed at the pretty rosetted slipper in frantic delight. "It seemed so hard he should have to give up being a soldier, and take to writing all day. He never *could* look like anything but an officer!" enthusiastically.

"Who is that you are holding forth about, Joe?" Mildred asked, suddenly bringing back her thoughts from the blissful world of imagination in

which they had been soaring, to the more prosaic present.

"Captain Macgregor. He is going into the army again."

"Yes, so Guy told me."

"Well, you might have told *us*. Here is the account of the dinner given in his honour by the regiment."

"Where? Is Guy's name mentioned? *Do* let me see!"

And Mildred sprang from her seat, and made a dash at the newspaper.

At this moment the door opened, and Mrs. Mervyn entered the room. A vexed look was on her face; in her hand she held a letter.

"Gwendoline, would you kindly read this," she began, crossly, "and see if you cannot use your influence with Auriol in the matter? I really think I never saw such a case of pig-headed obstinacy in my life."

Lady Sylvestre opened her eyes as the tones of her mother's voice fell upon her ear; then raised herself and took the letter, which was in the handwriting of Lady Denison.

"DEAR SARAH," it began, "since last I wrote to you we have been staying here with Sir John and Lady Bramtree. Among the guests are Lord Danvers and his mother, the latter tiresome as usual, with her pug and that dreadful wig. She reminds me of Catherine de Medicis in the way she is always running after and documenting that unfortunate son of hers, and the amount of time and trouble she wastes in painting and powdering her wrinkled old face. However, that is not what I wanted to write about. It is this: Lord Danvers asked for an interview with me yesterday for the purpose of begging me to intercede on his behalf with Auriol. He seems very much in love with her. His mother, too (so he says) looks favourably upon the match, and he asks as a favour that he may be allowed to plead his cause once more. Now, I really think that something might be done in this matter to bring Auriol to reason. Such a match as this is not one to be thrown away, or even lightly regarded, and as Auriol's affections can be in no way previously engaged, I do *certainly think* (dashed) that she ought to reconsider her refusal. Perhaps Gwendoline might talk to her

I hear she is with you now. Write soon, and tell me what answer I am to give to the expectant lover.—Your affectionate sister,

"CAROLINE DENISON."

Lady Sylvestre folded up the letter, and returned it to the envelope.

"What do you wish me to do?" she asked.

Mrs. Mervyn glanced at Auriol.

"I wish to speak to Gwendoline for a few minutes alone, girls," she said. "Mildred, you can take your letter into the dining-room or come back and finish it by-and-bye," with a supercilious glance at the two closely-written sheets which Mildred, with a smile upon her lip, was carefully reading to herself.

Catching the look upon her mother's face, she rose hastily, and gathering up her writing materials, left the room. Auriol picked up her kitten, and was departing also, when Mrs. Mervyn stopped her.

"Before you go, Auriol, I wish you to read your aunt's letter, and weigh well its contents, that you may think over the answer which I have to make to it."

Auriol looked wonderingly from her mother to her sister, then took the letter and began its perusal. A red flush mounted to her forehead as she read the part about Lord Danvers. She said nothing, however, till she had finished, and handed it back to her mother. Then she remarked slowly—

"It is no use, mother; I shall not marry him."

"I do not want your answer at present," Mrs. Mervyn replied, coldly. "As I said before, I wish you to think over it. You know what my wishes are. I trust you will follow them, as Gwendoline has done, and not disappoint me like Mildred. You can go now."

"I don't want to disappoint you, mamma," Auriol said, gently stroking the kitten's soft fur, while the tears rose in her eyes. "I would marry him, indeed I would, to please you if I liked him the least little bit, but I don't; I—I *hate* him!" And with a smothered sob she rushed from the room.

"Ridiculous nonsense!" Mrs. Mervyn said, crossly, as the door closed. "Really, Gwendoline, I do wish you would speak to her. *You* have

married according to my wishes, and you are happy enough; why should not Auriol be the same? She"—

"Mother, don't talk of happiness and *me* together! I am the most miserable woman upon the face of the earth!" Lady Sylvestre replied, vehemently.

Mrs. Mervyn was startled.

"Miserable?" she repeated. "*Miserable?* What do you mean? With such a good husband, and everything you can desire? *Miserable?*" in astonished tones.

"Yes, miserable. I married Robert, as you say, to please *you*. I did not love him; I loved somebody else. He knows it now. That is the reason we have parted."

Gwendoline spoke coldly, her face calm and rigid as a statue. Her mother stood looking at her in petrified astonishment, her lips parted, her hands grasping the back of a chair for support.

"Parted!" she gasped at length; "did you say you and Robert had *parted*, Gwendoline?"

"Yes, we have parted. It is not likely he should care to have me near him after the way I have

deceived him. He is quite right to go and leave me."

Still the same cold, stern tones, the same calm, statue-like countenance. Mrs. Mervyn gasped again. She did not speak.

"I thought you would have understood how matters were, from the wording of my letter," Lady Sylvestre went on. "I meant you to do so. The world, of course, only knows that Lord Sylvestre is going for a trip to Australia, and that Lady Sylvestre, not being able to stand the sea voyage, remains behind under the chaperonage of her mother. Most natural and proper!" with a bitter laugh.

"Gwendoline, you—you frighten me! What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I say, mamma. Robert and I have agreed to part. It is better so. I have been wanting to tell you all this before, but you did not invite my confidence. And of course I shall not remain here longer than the time required for verifying the story which has been given forth to the world. After that I shall go and hide my diminished head in some obscure country village

where no finger can point at me as the woman who has been divorced from her husband."

"But — Gwendoline — this is dreadful! Can *nothing* be done?"

Mrs. Mervyn sank into a chair, for once in her life thoroughly nonplussed. The shock of her daughter's words had deprived her of every particle of her wonted self-possession. She sat trembling and agitated beyond all power of control.

"Something must be done," she murmured, faintly, as Lady Sylvestre did not answer; "something must certainly be done."

"Nothing can be done. Robert will never forgive me for the deception I have practised upon him in letting him think I went to him heart-whole. If I had not been schooled to regard love as but a secondary consideration, and wealth and position as *everything* in marriage, I might have been a happy woman, instead of the wretched object of pity I am now. I threw away everything, for what? An empty title and money, which now I loathe!"

She stamped her foot angrily upon the ground.

Mrs. Mervyn sat looking at her, amazement and despair momentarily increasing in her face.

"And do you mean to say that you are really separated, and for ever, from your husband?" she said, in awestruck tones.

"Yes, I mean it," calmly.

"Then I think you ought to be ashamed of yourself!" her mother exclaimed, anger slowly taking the place of dismay in her mind.

Lady Sylvestre opened her blue eyes in surprise at the sudden burst of wrath.

"Yes, I repeat it. You ought to be ashamed of yourself! I have told you over and over and over again that your behaviour to Robert was anything but what it should have been, but you chose to treat my words as unwarrantable interference, and to disregard my warnings. It is a strange thing that after all the pains I have taken with you girls you should have disappointed me so. I cannot think where you could all of you have got the vulgar and silly notions you seem to delight in. Look at Mildred! There is a match for any girl to have chosen! A man without a halfpenny, and not even a baronetage in prospect! And

Auriol, too! refusing a man like Lord Danvers! It is *monstrous!*" angrily.

"Lord Danvers is not a fit husband for Auriol," Gwendoline replied, decisively. "Robert said he used to drink dreadfully; and then look at him! he is not a bit like a gentleman!"

"I do not believe he drank, and if he did, it is only what a great many others do. It"—

"Robert does not," Lady Sylvestre interrupted hastily. "He hates men who do, too"—

"It is rather a pity, if you are so well aware of your husband's superiority over other men, that you did not behave to him a little better!" Mrs. Mervyn said sarcastically.

"Perhaps so, but I prefer not to discuss my husband with anybody. He has been very good and kind, too kind, to me. It is only *I* who am to blame. Now about Auriol. Mother, *do* be guided by me, and let her have her own way in this matter. Think of my wasted life, of the little good my grand marriage has done for me, and let my sisters marry for love; do not let ambition mar *their* future prospects! I tell you, mother, I would give all I possess—title, money, *everything*—

for one short hour of my life to come over again!"

She stopped, and looked at her mother entreatingly, her hands clasped together so tightly that the glittering rings made red marks on her white fingers.

"You talk like—like an *actress*, Gwendoline, not like a daughter of mine, and I do not think you have any right to speak of *ambition* in connection with your mother. It is only what I may expect, I suppose, after all the opposition which my wishes have met with lately. However, as I told your father when he foolishly gave in to Mildred, I wash my hands of you; you may go your own ways. Janet and Auriol I certainly did have hopes of, but there again I am disappointed. John Raynor's return was the most unfortunate occurrence. Janet might have married to please *me* if it had not been for *him*."

"I am glad dear Janet will be happy," Lady Sylvestre, said dreamily; "few people deserve it more. She was so loyal and true, whereas *I* threw away an honest love."

She rose from her seat, and walked away to the window.

"Then you will not do as I ask you, and persuade Auriol to accept Lord Danvers?" Mrs. Mervyn said, coldly.

"No, mamma, I *cannot!*"

"Very well. Then all I beg of you, since you see fit to go against me in this matter, is not to influence Auriol either way. Have I your promise to that effect?"

Lady Sylvestre's eyes came back from their contemplation of the distant sunlit ocean, and were fixed on her mother's face.

"If Auriol comes to me for advice I shall give it. She shall not share my fate if I can help it," she said, firmly.

Mrs. Mervyn looked at her daughter for a few moments in silence, then picking up her sister's letter, without a word she swept from the room.

Abbott's Home was certainly under a cloud for the remainder of the day.

CHAPTER XV.

"FACE TO FACE."

"AND you must really go back to Venice to-morrow, Bertie?"

"Yes, mother mine, I must start to-morrow; for my chief will expect me to be at my post on Thursday. It was very good-natured of him to let me have these few weeks; he is such a crusty old beggar in some things."

"But you will give it up, and come back to England again, won't you?" Lady Macgregor asked anxiously, looking up at her son as he stood before her on the rug.

"Give up the secretaryship, yes. Come back to England again, no; I think not."

The words were spoken quietly enough, but there came a look of pain across his face, which did not escape his mother's quick eye. She laid down the piece of embroidery she was at work upon, and gazed with eyes of loving anxiety at her son's face. Though everything had turned out in

his favour, though he was once again exalted into a hero, courted and run after by that world which a while ago had scorned and forsaken him, the look of sadness and gloom had not wholly departed. Now and then the stern set expression of endurance would settle on his features, his manner would change from its genial cordiality to a certain grave courtesy, which repelled any further advances; and people wondered whether it was pride which made Captain Macgregor draw back from their eager congratulations.

None wondered more than his mother at the indifference with which he received the public adulation which was offered him; but she never gave voice to her wonder, though now, when she saw again the sadness on his face, the feeling returned in full force.

"Why will you not stay in England, Bertie?" she asked, at length.

Captain Macgregor took a little ivory box off the mantelpiece, and turned it about in his fingers for some moments in silence; then he said, slowly—

"I think, on the whole, I am better away from England, mother."

"Is the old trouble not got over yet, my son?"

Bertie started.

"I know all about it," Lady Macgregor went on, gently; "Janet Mervyn told me. I pitied you, my boy, from my heart; but she was not worthy of your love."

"Hush, mother! not a word against *her*. *Mine* was the blame; in that I dared to love her when she belonged to another. Why did Janet Mervyn mention the subject to you?" he added, abruptly.

Lady Macgregor told him how she had gone to Janet with the question as to whether she herself were the cause of the alleged jealousy between John Raynor and his supposed murderer, and how the girl had then told her of her son's hopeless love for Lady Sylvestre.

"She is coming back to Abbott's Home for a time," Lady Macgregor said, *apropos* of Gwendoline; "I suppose, while her husband goes to Australia."

"I suppose so," Macgregor returned, absently. "Do you want anything in the village, mother?" he continued, after a pause; "I'm going down to

pay old Mrs. Pipkin a visit. She thinks I'm one of the champions of Christendom."

He sauntered from the room, whistling softly the "Little Tin Soldier."

His mother sighed.

"Poor, dear boy! how I wish he had never met that odious young woman! I shall never feel as if I could forgive her; though, perhaps, after all she may not have known anything about it! Still, the girls of the present day are so different to what they were when I was young—so forward and greedy of admiration, they seem to stay at nothing."

And Lady Macgregor took up her embroidery again, and began to fill in the petals of a rose with quite unnecessary energy, her mind full of the girl who could have found it better policy to marry an earl whom she did not care for, than to have been Bertie's wife.

Meanwhile, the "poor, dear boy" betook himself down to the village, followed by the admiring glances of the women at their cottage doors, who dropped a shy curtsey in response to his kindly nod and smile.

"Eh!" said one old crone to her next door neighbour, "to think they should hev said *he* killed the Squire. Why they moight as well hev laid it on the Prince o' Wales hisself, bless un!"

Mrs. Pipkin was in one of her worst tempers this afternoon. She hadn't even a good word for the little grandson who was her pride and joy; and the latter was heard to declare in the privacy of his family circle, that "he warn't a-goin' ter grannie's never no more, cos she'd slapped him!"

Captain Macgregor's cheery "good-day" was met by a grunt; his remark that the weather was fine elicited the astonishing reply that "*Some* people might think so; for *her* part, she preferred the wet."

"Anything up, Mrs. Pipkin?" said the Captain. "You look rather in the blues to-day."

"Blues or greens, 'tain't much good when a lone widder gets sat upon as I've been this blessed day. I'm most wore out!"

"Why, what's the matter?"

"Matter enow. 'Ere's Government a-goin' to 'stablish a reg'lar post-office to work the talegraph,

and they're a-goin' ter build a new place, and hev down some o' they stuck up boobies o' talegraph girls, all flounces and ill-manners. It's enow to try the temper of a saint; an' me been 'ere this twelve year. Government indeed!"

And Mrs. Pipkin tossed her head disdainfully.

"Well, never mind," Macgregor, said soothingly; "they've got to build the place first, you know, and that will take some time. It's no use going in a coach and six to meet trouble; *I've* found that out."

"And you've had cause, sir, if anybody had. Why, folks dew say— No, Miss Bottomly, there *ain't* no letters. No, nor schoolmaster nuther for *you*, my fine lady," under her breath, as the door closed behind Mary Bottomly's retreating form. "Her's another as aggrawates me; allus comin' in here for letters, an' she don't never have none. 'Spose she thinks that good-fer-nothin' Robertson's goin' ter write to her. Not *he!*"

Outside the post-office Captain Macgregor found Mary Bottomly—waiting for *him*, apparently—for directly she saw him she came towards him. Every vestige of good-looks she had ever possessed had

vanished now; her face looked old, and worn and haggard.

"Captain Macgregor"—as he raised his hat gravely—(another of his enemies at the trial, in his estimation, was this girl before him), "excuse my stopping you; but—I wanted to ask you something."

She stopped. Bertie bowed, and stood waiting.

"It—it is about Mr. Robertson"—she coughed, nervously—"Have they found him?"

"Not that I am aware of, Miss Bottomly."

"Do you think they will?"

"I think most probably."

"And—will they hang him?"

"Undoubtedly, if they can prove that he was the man who murdered Rolton."

Mary Bottomly shuddered.

"If you—come across him first," she said, laying her hand on Macgregor's arm, "shall you give him up?"

"It will be my painful duty to do so."

"And a splendid revenge for making you suffer in his stead. Truly, Captain Macgregor, you are as they say, a true soldier and a gallant, kind-

hearted gentleman! I pray night and day that he may never cross your path! Revenge! ah, revenge!"

She laughed a wild, sarcastic laugh; then before Macgregor could speak, she had turned from him and set off at a quick pace down the street.

"By Jove! the girl is mad!" Bertie exclaimed slowly, as he looked after her. "Wonder what her mother is about to let her be at large. I always thought she was cracked."

But as he walked back to the Hall, Captain Macgregor kept saying over to himself the words, "If you come across him first, shall you give him up?"

"Deuced awkward!" he thought. "I hope to goodness I shan't see him directly I get back to Venice. I shouldn't like to deliver the poor beggar up to be hanged."

* * * * *

Sir Arthur Dashwood was certainly far from being pleased at his secretary's resignation. He liked Macgregor as much as it was in his power to like anybody; besides, the latter suited him in every way. He was clear-headed, and seemed to

possess an intuitive capability of doing the right thing in the right place.

"Why can't you make up your mind to take a profession and *stick* to it?" the Consul gruffly remarked, when his secretary intimated his wish to quit the post which he had now held for more than six months, and declared his intention of entering the army again. "You will never get on if you keep changing about. Lazy fellows, officers. Better by half get an honest living in a counting-house."

It was a pouring wet day. The

Cloud-capped towers and gorgeous palaces

of Venice were enveloped in a thick, white mist, and the very air seemed full of moisture which penetrated to the skin of the venturesome wayfarer, and made him shiver with its damp, cold touch.

Bertie Macgregor sat in his room writing letters, while opposite to him Lord Sylvestre was reading the newspaper, a cigar in his mouth, and his feet stretched out to the fire.

"I won't be a minute, but I particularly wanted

this to go to-day," Macgregor murmured, as he continued his occupation.

"Don't mind me, old fellow; I'd just as soon wait. I'm in no hurry, and I haven't seen the English papers for days."

Once more there was silence. The rain pattered on the window panes, and the chilly autumn wind moaned and sighed like a human soul in pain. Something of the heaviness outside seemed to extend to the occupants of the cosy room, for more than once a sigh escaped Lord Sylvestre's lips, while Bertie's face wore an unmistakable look of sadness.

At length Macgregor's letters were finished, sealed, and directed; the porter was called to post them, then Macgregor drew his chair up to the fire, lit a cigar, and prepared for a chat.

"And so you are really off next week," he began, as his companion laid aside the paper.

"Yes; I start for England to-morrow, and the 'Hesperus' leaves on Wednesday or Thursday," Lord Sylvestre replied, looking thoughtfully at his cigar.

"Lady Sylvestre will be"—

"Don't talk of *her*, Macgregor, for heaven's sake, unless you want to drive me mad! She won't be *anything*, or if anything *glad* to be rid of me, glad to be her own mistress, unfettered by the presence of the husband whom she only married for his title and wealth; glad to think that she may never have a chance of seeing him again! No, don't talk to me of *her!*"

Lord Sylvestre rose from his seat, and began to pace up and down the room; presently he came back and sat down again.

"Let us talk of something else," he said hurriedly. "I saw Robertson yesterday I fancy, on the Rialto; he was in front of me, but I could not be mistaken. I tried to overtake him, when he suddenly disappeared. I wasn't altogether sorry somehow. I shouldn't care to be the man to give him up to justice, richly as he deserves hanging."

"Nor I," Macgregor said thoughtfully.

"Well, I must say I don't think *you* need have any qualms of conscience about it, after the way he behaved to you."

"And yet I shouldn't care to harm the poor devil. By Jove! what a wreck he was that last

time I saw him, and I made him worse of course by continually harping upon Gresham, and the murder of Rolton."

"We shall come across him yet, mark my words. I wonder somebody hasn't claimed the reward; it would be a fortune to one of these poor 'ne'er-do-weels' one sees loafing about, with nothing but a chance piece of luck at the gaming tables to depend upon. I fancy Gresham was disguised in some way when I saw him. He looked like a Jesuit; but I may have been mistaken. I was so uncertain that I made no attempt to get at him; one doesn't care about pitching upon the wrong man, and getting stilettoed for one's pains."

"Just what Goldie and I say," Macgregor replied. "By-the-bye have you seen him lately?"

"Who, Goldie? Not for a week or two. I fancy he has gone to Deerham again; the weddings are coming off soon."

"Oh! The Goldies will live at the Abbey, I suppose. Miss Leslie will make a charming 'chatelaine.'"

At this moment there came a knock at the

door, and Hedges appeared. He advanced solemnly to the table, and laid down a small sealed packet before his master.

"A boy brought this just now, sir. He said he was to give it into your own hands hisself, but he was one o' them dirty young rascals out of the gutter, and I wouldn't let him come up; so says I, 'You give it me, youngster, and I'll take it right away,' at least, sir, of course I didn't say it right to the boy, but old Shako down below, he translates ye see, sir."

Bertie looked at the package somewhat curiously, then took it in his fingers.

"Is the boy here now?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, but there's no answer; Shako asked him."

"Very well, give him that," tossing a piece of money across the table.

"You must find it a great boon having an English servant," Sylvestre remarked, as Hedges withdrew.

"Yes." Macgregor was studying the name and address on the packet. "He wouldn't leave me, begged so hard that I would keep him on, and

let him come with me here, that at last I consented. But he can't speak Italian, and is always getting into rows with the people of the house. I find it rather a bore sometimes. I wonder what the dickens this can be," turning over the missive reflectively; "looks uncommonly fishy, *I* think."

"Open it," suggested Lord Sylvestre.

Bertie slowly broke the seal, and drew from the outside wrapper some closely written sheets of note-paper. He turned them over to find a signature. Sylvestre watching him, saw him start.

"It is from Gresham," he said slowly.

"Ah! Let's see what he says for himself."

"You can read it aloud if you will," Macgregor said, handing it across the table.

"CAPTAIN MACGREGOR," the letter began, "when last we met you spoke to me and treated me as a friend. You did not know *then* (though you may know it now) how little I deserved your kindness; had you done so, you would doubtless have considered it your duty to have delivered me up there and then to justice. I would have told you all; I nearly did so, but the fear of your just

contempt and anger held me back. God knows I have repented over and over again the wrong I did you. I would come and ask your pardon and forgiveness upon my knees if it would do any good, but you would only spurn me with loathing and contempt, as I deserve. Yet before you condemn me utterly, read the confession I am about to make, and let your generous heart spare a little pity for the man whom misfortune, cruelty, and crime, have bereft of every blessing which falls to the lot of mankind.

"My real name is Gilbert Gresham. My family owned a fine old country seat close on the borders of one of the Cumberland lakes. Here generation after generation of Greshams had lived and died, and I was left the sole representative of the family. Alas!

How are the mighty fallen!

"My proud ancestors might well come out of their graves in horror at the disgrace which has come upon their noble house, for the Greshams count an earl and two baronets among their kindred, and were a proud race.

"My mother was a widow when my father married her; she had one child, a boy, two years old. When I was born my father made another will, leaving Garthwaite, in the event of my leaving no sons at my death, to my half-brother Lewis Rolton.

"As boys we were much attached to each other. Lewis was always the smaller and more weakly of the two, though he was three years my senior. I constituted myself his champion at school, his guide and mentor at college; he always looked to me for everything—help, advice, and protection. I gave it willingly, for I loved him as though he were really my own brother.

"When I was twenty-six the first real romance of my somewhat retired and secluded life came to me, to change the whole course of my future. We three, my mother, Lewis, and I, lived alone in the gloomy old house among the hills, seeing little society, and rarely leaving home. But one day came a letter from an old friend of my mother's, written just before her death, and begging for a home for her orphaned daughter, left alone in a foreign land.

"Lucille Riletto came to us, and my dream of love began. She was beautiful as an angel, and had a voice like a syren. She sang to me, talked to me, flattered and caressed me, and I loved her as my very life.

"Time passed on. I proposed to her, she accepted me, we were married.

"Three years we passed together, she and I, in our quiet country home among the heather-covered mountains and peaceful valleys. Then a summons came to me to attend the dying bed of my mother's only sister. She had been kind to me as a boy, and had made me her heir. My mother implored me to go, and I went.

"Never shall I forget my home-coming, when after having closed my aunt's eyes, and seen her laid to rest in the pretty churchyard at Shelby, in Wiltshire, where she lived, I returned to Garthwaite and Lucille.

"Captain Macgregor, when you feel inclined to rail at me, and call me a villain for the part I have played to *you*, think how I have suffered!

"I arrived at home to find the house desolate, my wife gone—eloped with Lewis Rolton, and

myself the laughing-stock of the country. For the latter I cared nothing. I had made few friends among my neighbours; their opinion was nothing to me, but that *she*, the wife whom I idolized, should have loved another better than myself, drove me mad!"

Lord Sylvestre laid down the paper with a kind of gasp; then as if ashamed of this show of emotion he took it up again, but his hands trembled, his eyes were dim; presently he went on—

"I was struck down with fever in the midst of my wild and frantic schemes for revenge, and for weeks lay on a bed of suffering, from which I rose weak and exhausted, but still with one set and indomitable purpose in my mind—*revenge!* I would wait my time, then when Lewis least expected it I would kill him.

"For some time I wandered about from place to place, taking a situation as organist now and then, as the fancy seized me—I was always musical, and a fair performer, both on the piano and organ. Finally I accepted the post of village schoolmaster

at Grayling. All this time I had heard nothing of my wife or Rolton.

"One stormy night, the evening of Lord Sylvestre's wedding day—(Sylvestre shivered)—I met him. Once more we stood face to face—and all my desire for vengeance returned. Mr. Raynor saved him from me that night—but the next morning I dogged his footsteps to the wood—and killed him. I used to go every day to see if the body was safe—I knew I should not be found out—nobody would accuse the village schoolmaster of murder, and of a man about whom he knew nothing. Old Mike Dillon suspected me, but I soon silenced him with money, and threats of getting him turned out of his place, if he said anything.

"Then came the finding of the body—the strange delusion of its being that of Mr. Raynor—the inquest, and the subsequent arrest of yourself, Captain Macgregor, as the murderer. In justification of myself, I must tell you, that had you been condemned, I should at once have come forward and confessed the crime. But you were acquitted. I should now have time to go and find my wife, and try to win her back. I found her, singing on

the stage here in Venice, under her maiden name. She still loved Rolton, and upbraided me for concealing from her his present whereabouts. Driven at last to desperation I told her he was dead, and the shock killed her—though I did not know it till some time afterwards, when rising from a sick bed, I once more came forth to look again upon the world I detested. Now was my time to make reparation to the man I had injured—but I put it off—'To-morrow,' I have said to myself each day —'Yes, one day more, and to-morrow, I will tell him all, and deliver myself up to justice.' Now, however, I can delay no longer. The faces of my wife and Rolton are ever before me, mocking my cowardice, and exulting in my despair. I hear the rain outside—I can fancy how the sea is roaring, and the wind shrieks in derision—I can understand every word it says—'Go, wretch that thou art, and when thou hast done thy duty by an innocent man, then come down to the shore, that I may hurl thee to thy doom." Cruel wind! still more cruel sea! I come. Farewell. Forgive, if you can.

"GILBERT GRESHAM."

"The fellow is insane," Macgregor said, as Lord Sylvestre laid down the letter. "Yes—something must be done at once—I will go and put the matter into the hands of the authorities—they can act as they think best."

* * * * *

A dark wild night—the wind howling and shrieking, the rain pouring down in torrents, and wilder and more stormy than all, the restless, angry, tempest-tossed ocean.

Upon a sort of under-pier or breakwater, stretching out into the sea, stood the motionless figure of a man. His head was bared to the stormy winds, the pelting rain, his arms were stretched out towards the dark leaden sky.

"Ah! Lucille! cease to mock me!" he cried in imploring tones, "love for *you* has made me what I am—a coward and a murderer! Just Heaven, forgive me the wrongs I have done! Pardon my sins, for they are great—and almost beyond forgiveness. Yet Thou, who hast mercy on the vilest of sinners, look on me!"

He knelt upon the damp, slippery ground, and

raised his eyes towards heaven—clasping his hands in agonised entreaty. The winds howled in mockery of his prayer, the great waves washed in derision over the very place where he knelt (for the first time for many a long year) in prayer.

"I will go, good Lord," he said, "I will go and make reparation—to-morrow shall see the murderer in his prison cell, awaiting his doom, the upright shall be justified! and then, good Lord, remember me but for good—be merciful to me a sinner! Yes, to-morrow"—

But there was no to-morrow for *him*. When at length the clouds broke, and the silver moon looked forth upon the sea, she saw the dead body of a man floating on its bosom—his white face still turned towards heaven.

CHAPTER XVI.

"I LOVE YOU NOW."

It was the anniversary of Gwendoline Sylvestre's wedding day—and husband and wife were spending it apart.

Mrs. Mervyn looked at her eldest daughter as she entered the dining-room, where the rest of the family were assembled at breakfast, and thought of the anonymous letter which a year ago to-day had so truly prophesied the future. She noted the pale, sad face, the haughty curl of the lip, and something like a tear rose in her eyes at the sight. Well, it was no use grieving over it all now. Gwendoline was a countess, nothing could alter that; she was the envied of the envious, the leader of fashion, one of the queens of society —whose portrait had been the making of the artist who exhibited it in the Royal Academy—whose photograph was in every shop window in London. Next season she would appear again, under her mother's chaperonage (Mrs. Mervyn's

heart swelled at the thought), and again take the fashionable world by storm.

"Is that a letter from Robert, Gwen? When is he coming to bid us good-bye?"

The question came from Janet. She recognised the somewhat peculiar handwriting of Lord Sylvestre. To *her* there was nothing strange in his writing to his wife on their wedding-day. Neither she nor her sisters knew anything of what had passed between the husband and wife; *they* put down their sister's silence and troubled look to the sorrow she felt at the coming separation.

"Yes, it is from Robert. He talks of coming to-morrow."

"What a good thing we had fixed to go to Carisbroke to-day, then, wasn't it?" put in Auriol, eagerly.

"Yes, a very good thing," Lady Sylvestre replied, absently.

Her eyes were fixed upon a small packet which lay in her plate.

"Robert has sent you a present on your wedding day. Do open it, and let us see what it is!"

Auriol went on, rising from her seat and going round to Gwendoline's chair.

Lady Sylvestre took it up and turned it over.

"I will open it presently, when I have finished my letter," she said; and Auriol went back to her seat, with a strange sensation of having been snubbed.

Mrs. Mervyn had looked on in astonishment. If, as Gwendoline had said, she and Robert had parted for ever, how came he to be sending her presents, and coming to see her? Truly, people did strange things nowadays.

"We must make haste and finish breakfast; I hear the waggonette coming round," Janet exclaimed. "And here is John!" hastily rising from her seat and rushing from the room, as a figure passed the window.

"I can't think why Mr. Raynor" (Mrs. Mervyn never called him John) "always manages to get here in the middle of a meal. Janet will eat no more breakfast now," crossly.

"I suppose he was afraid we should start without him," Mildred said, laughing.

"Raynor and I are going to ride; so we should

soon have overtaken you," Guy Wincombe remarked, in lazy tones.

"Not you; it would never do for you to exert yourself so much as that," his *fiancée* retorted, witheringly. "We are going to pick up the Leslies on our way."

"How many does the waggonette hold, then? By Jove! you'll be a load for the horses!" Wincombe exclaimed, opening his sleepy blue eyes in pretended wonder.

"Oh, we shall squeeze in. *You* won't be there, you know, so there won't be much difficulty in—Oh!"—breaking off abruptly—"how lovely, Gwen. Do let us look!"

Lady Sylvestre started, and looked vacantly round the table, as though she had a faint idea of having been addressed and did not know by whom. Her thoughts were far away in the pretty salon of the Villa Riletto, where she had heard her husband denounce her for ever. His letter lay open before her. She knew it by heart now.

"I have sent to my wife on our wedding day a small token of the love which, though she will never care for it, nor return it, still fills the heart

she has broken. When you look upon it, Gwendoline, think of me kindly. Try to realize how much I love you; how sincerely I pray that you may be happy in the future. This little offering I have had made expressly for you; it was designed in the days when *I* at least was happy, and deluded myself into the false hope that *you* were happy too. I cannot withhold it now that we are estranged from each other, because I want you to understand that in spite of all I love you still. I must see you once more—to say a last good-bye, and to make some arrangements for your future. I shall try and run down to Grayling on Tuesday."

This was Monday. To-morrow, then, she would see him for the last time. She did not love him, yet the tears gathered in her eyes at the thought. Then she opened the packet, wondering vaguely what could be inside the blue morocco case upon which was her monogram—G.S. entwined. She touched the spring, and it flew open, disclosing to view a large gold locket. Gwendoline took it out slowly, eliciting as she did so the cry of admiration from Mildred.

All crowded round her to see it. It was, indeed, a magnificent affair. On one side was Lady Sylvestre's monogram in diamonds, surmounted by a coronet; on the reverse side the Sylvestre badge, a sprig of myrtle in emeralds, and upon a blue enamel ribbon the motto—

Treu und fest.

"Open it, Gwen," said Janet, who had returned with John Raynor, and joined in the universal admiration. "Perhaps Robert's photo is inside."

Gwendoline obeyed mechanically, and her eyes fell upon an exquisitely painted miniature of her husband. The face wore its best expression, the grey eyes looked at her as they used to look in the days before he found out how unworthy she was of all his love. Gwendoline remembered now, that once while they were in London during the season, her husband had told her he was having his portrait painted—that it was a secret, and she was not to see it yet. She did not pay much heed to the announcement at the time; she knew now that Lord Sylvestre must have been preparing this for her, even then. How he loved her! and how badly she had behaved to him.

"It is time for us to start girls, you had better make haste," Mrs. Mervyn said, as the little crowd round Lady Sylvestre gradually dispersed. "You are coming Gwendoline I hope?"

"Yes, mamma, I am coming," listlessly.

The waggonette stood at the door—hampers and rugs were being stowed away under the seats and coach box. Thomas was in his element, ordering and lecturing, giving last injunctions to Payne to "be careful o' the 'ouse door, and not to let anybody in unless he know'd 'em."

"Ye're young an' hinexperienced, Payne," he said grandly, "an' if yer takes a word from yer betters, ye'll do well, an' not disgrace the hstablishment. Hif yer don't, why—well, missus 'll be down upon yer—sharp."

Mr. Mervyn was the last to enter the carriage; he had given up his farm for to-day, and was to accompany the party to Carisbroke.

"Stay a moment!" he cried as Thomas slammed the door and touched his hat. "Here's the telegraph boy coming—we had better wait and see what it is."

The occupants of the waggonette awaited in im-

patient excitement the approach of the boy, who was sauntering up the drive, as if telegrams required an especial accession of slowness.

"Now then, my boy, make haste! don't you see we are waiting for you?" Mr. Mervyn said sharply, when the lad came within earshot. "For you Gwen," he said, taking the yellow envelope and reading the address.

Lady Sylvestre took it eagerly—her face paling. It contained only a few words.

"From LORD SYLVESTRE, London—to LADY SYLVESTRE, Abbott's Home, Grayling, Isle of Wight.

"Shall come to-day instead of to-morrow —ships sails a day earlier."

Gwendoline read it aloud, then added—

"I shall not go now of course—but it need not make any difference to any one else. Robert will be sure to stay till you come back."

"But my dear, it will look so strange our being away—*I* will stop with you," Mrs. Mervyn said hurriedly. She *must* get a word with her son-in-law before Gwendoline saw him, to get him to reconsider his determination of leaving his wife.

"I could not think of your doing so, mamma. I will get Robert to stay till you come home."

"But Gwendoline"—

"There is really no occasion for you to stop besides—I—I would rather see him alone."

She turned and alighted from the carriage, and stood watching it, till it disappeared down the drive.

"I will not have mamma interfering in this matter," she said to herself, as she went indoors.

It was a wearisome morning—Gwendoline thought it would never come to an end—Lord Sylvestre had said nothing about the time he should arrive at Grayling—perhaps at the last moment, he would not come at all. Lady Sylvestre ate her solitary luncheon, or made a pretence of eating it, and then betook herself to the drawing-room with a book.

"Do not say that I am at home if any one calls," she had said to Payne, "unless of course, Lord Sylvestre comes."

An hour passed away, and there came a loud ring at the door.

"Is Lady Sylvestre at home?"

"Yes, m' lord."

"Where is she?"

"Hin the drawring-room m' lord."

"Very well—I will go there. You need not announce me."

"Who says as I don't know how ter 'open the door to a *lord?*" said Payne to himself, as he went back to his plate-cleaning in the pantry.

Across the hall Lord Sylvestre passed quickly, and turned the handle of the drawing-room door. His first glance round the apartment showed him the figure of his wife in a low, easy chair, by the fire. She did not rise to greet him, did not even change her position. Sylvestre shut the door behind him, and crossed the room to where she sat. Then he saw that she had fallen asleep.

He stood on the rug and watched her. How beautiful she was—yet how thin and pale her face looked, and there were dark circles beneath the closed eyelids, while the mouth, no longer stern and haughty, drooped pathetically at the corners, like a child's, when it is going to cry. Her dress of some soft, clinging material, was trimmed with delicate lace—ruffles of the same fell over the

hands which lay in her lap—in one of which was clasped the locket her husband had sent her that morning. It was open, as though she had fallen asleep, even while thinking of him. Lord Sylvestre started, as he saw it—then his eyes went back to the lovely face, so perfect in its repose. All the love which he had been vainly trying to stifle, leaped up again in greater force than ever. One word from her now would win him back to her side. Still she slept on—and still he stood on the rug with his eyes fixed upon her face.

The afternoon wore on. Outside, the red gold of the autumn sun, now sinking farther and farther in the west, tinged the woods and hills with a mellow light. Far away over the sea was a glittering path, across which every now and then a tiny yacht skimmed like a white-winged bird.

Lord Sylvestre's eyes followed it, with a strange fascination. Where was it going to? he wondered vaguely. He would have a yacht again himself, as he used to do in his bachelor days; it would serve to beguile the time, and take his thoughts.

"*Robert!*"

He turned quickly. Gwendoline's eyes were open now, she half rose from her seat.

"I—I beg your pardon," she began, hurriedly, the colour rushing to her face. "I did not know you had come."

"And yet I have been here nearly an hour," he said, smiling a little.

"I am very sorry, you should have awoke me."

"I could scarcely find it in my heart to do that, though I fear it must have been a necessity before long. My train goes at six," glancing at his watch.

"So soon? The others were hoping to see you before—before you left."

"They are all out then?"

"Yes, they have gone a picnic to Carisbroke; we only had your telegram just as we were starting; if it had been a few minutes later you would have found nobody at home."

"And you stayed at home to see me? That was kind, Gwen."

Lady Sylvestre rose hastily from her seat and

walked to the window. She felt inclined to cry, and that would never do. He would only think she was acting a part if she gave any sign of grief at his departure.

"Did you like the locket?" Lord Sylvestre said, presently.

"Very much."

"The likeness is good, I think."

"Yes; but the hair is too dark, and the face strikes me as being paler than you usually are."

Gwendoline looked at the locket, which still lay in her hand, then from it to her husband's face. Their eyes met—she coloured and looked away again out of the window.

"I start to-morrow for London," Sylvestre said. "The 'Hesperus' sails on Wednesday; I have business which will detain me in Portsmouth to-night."

Lady Sylvestre did not answer. Her husband went on—

"If you will kindly attend to me for a few minutes, Gwendoline, I have one or two things to say to you."

"I am listening," came the quiet answer.

"By your marriage settlements you are aware that I agreed to allow you a thousand a year pin-money. This, with five hundred added to it, has been settled upon you for life. Are you listening?"

"Yes."

"In the event of my death you will have a great deal more, but the estates are entailed, and therefore will go to George Cunnyngham, my cousin—Dean Court excepted—that is my own, and will be yours. For this reason I wish you to take it as your home from henceforth. Will you?"

There was no answer, Lady Sylvestre had taken out her handkerchief, and covered her face with it, while deep sobs came now and again with heart-rending persistency as though tearing her to pieces.

"Gwendoline! What is the matter? What are you crying for?" exclaimed her husband, in amazement.

"You—you are so unkind!"

"*Unkind?*"

Lord Sylvestre looked round the room as though

challenging the very pictures on the walls to refute such an assertion.

"*Unkind?*" he repeated wonderingly.

"I won't have the money! nor Dean Court, nor *anything!*" Gwendoline sobbed forth.

"But what are you going to live on? I should not like my wife to be a pensioner upon her parents' bounty," sternly,

"I don't want to live, I want to die!" came in broken accents.

Lord Sylvestre looked perplexed. None might tell the struggle it cost him to refrain from taking his weeping wife into his loving, tender arms, and soothing away her sorrow. But she hated him, his touch was repugnant to her. He would steel his heart against her.

"I should prefer, Gwendoline," speaking in hard, cold tones, because of the pitying tenderness which was in his heart, "that you did as I have requested—it will save talk, and I should like you to be in no wise straitened. In case I die, I have made a will appointing Macgregor one of the trustees of such property as I can leave to you, he will"—

"Robert! how *can* you talk to me so! I will *not* have anything to do with *him*, I *hate* him!"

Gwendoline rose from her seat, her sobs checked in her anger, her eyes flashing.

"You have no cause to do that, Gwendoline," her husband replied, gravely, "he has been a true friend to us both."

"He set you against me," she said, coldly.

"No one could do that, besides you are mistaken. Macgregor is a true-hearted, loyal gentleman."

There was a pause. Lady Sylvestre stood studying the motto on her locket. "Treu und fest." Lord Sylvestre looked at his watch.

"I must be going soon; it is past five, and it will take me twenty minutes to get to the station," he said, with a half-sigh.

"You had better have some tea first; it will be here in a minute."

Lady Sylvestre crossed the room to the fireplace and rang the bell. Payne appeared.

"Bring some tea at once."

"Yes, m' lady."

"And Payne"—as he was closing the door again—"see if cook has any tea-cakes."

"You remember my weakness for tea-cakes then?" Lord Sylvestre remarked, as the page disappeared.

How he wished this interview was at an end, Might he kiss her, he wondered, just once before he went away from her for ever? She was standing close beside him now, one foot on the fender, gazing into the fire. The scent of some violets in her dress came to him now and again. They were her favourite flowers; he should never see them without thinking of her.

Not a word was spoken till the entrance of the tea things. Gwendoline sat down by the little table and began to fill the cups; but her hands shook so that she could scarcely hold the teapot.

"Poor Robertson is dead—Gresham, I should say. He wrote a sort of confession to Macgregor the other day, which, of course, I went and placed in the hands of the police authorities.. They searched everywhere for Gresham without success, till his dead body was found one morning near one of the quays."

Lord Sylvestre spoke hurriedly, as though he were anxious to keep up a show of conversation,

his wife sipped her tea thoughtfully, but she made no comment, only sighed.

"And now I must really go. Gwendoline, what can I say to you in apology for all the misery I must, all unwittingly, have caused you? My darling wife (I am calling you so for the last time), think of me kindly, as one who loves you very dearly."

His voice faltered. He turned away for a moment and tried to recover himself, then took her two cold hands in his.

"In the future, if you are in any trouble or have need of me, I will come to you. My lawyers will always have my address."

Gwendoline suddenly threw her arms round his neck.

"Oh, Robert! don't go and leave me! I want you now! I shall die if you don't forgive me and take me back again! Indeed—*indeed* I am sorry dear! I have wanted you *dreadfully* all this time; and I did not like to ask you to come for fear you should think I was only pretending, but I have been *so* unhappy."

She clung to him sobbing.

"But, Gwendoline," he began, in bewildered tones, "you don't love me. You cared for Macgregor, not *me* !"

"Once I did. I have been a wicked woman and a bad wife; but oh, Robert! *do* try me once again! don't go and leave me!"

She felt his arms tighten around her. He pressed his lips on her hair.

"Will you love me, Gwendoline?"

"Who could help it, Robert? I knew I loved you this afternoon when I was looking at your picture. I"—lowering her voice—"kissed it."

"I should prefer that you kissed the original, if you have no objection," laughing.

She lifted her face, and their lips met in the first kiss of love she had ever given him.

"You won't go away now?" she said, softly.

"I shall see; perhaps a little more wholesome absence from each other will make our hearts grow fonder," he replied, lifting her face to his.

"I doubt it. Won't you have any more tea?" suddenly leaving his side as Payne entered the room. "You can take away them," catching the boy's look of wonder.

"They wos a spoonin' awful!" he announced to a delighted audience, consisting of the cook, kitchenmaid, and two housemaids, when he carried the tea things into the kitchen. "Talk about kissin'; 'ere, Mary Hann, I'll shew you how he were a doin'!"

But Mary Ann refused to be shown by "a bit of a boy," as she called him; and Payne retreated, wishing he were a man.

When the picnic party returned they were electrified by the intelligence that Lord Sylvestre had decided to deprive his ailing relative of the pleasure of a last sight of him, and intended to go to Scotland with his wife instead,

"Foolish fellow!" my readers will exclaim, "to give in like that."

Perhaps so, but such is life—made up of foolish things, yet containing among its foolish things, many noble, generous hearts ready and willing to forgive and forget. Where, but for them should *we* be; many of us who like Gwendoline, are weak foolish, and, in some things, *erring?*

CHAPTER XVII.

A LOYAL HEART.

THE untimely end of Gilbert Gresham, sad as it was in itself, yet saved the necessity of once more raking up unpleasant memories. Lord Sylvestre sent a copy of his confession to the newspapers, in which it appeared in full, together with many comments and conjectures as to the means by which he came by his death, but the probability of suicide was too great for much investigation to arise, and by-and-bye the murderer and his victim were alike forgotten by the world at large. Only in one faithful heart did the memory of Robertson still linger with loving regret. Mary Bottomly never recovered her former robust appearance, and gushing, affected manners. She became prematurely old, and her temper, never one of the best, increased in harshness with every year of her life, till her sister, in desperation, married a young farmer in one of our prettiest villages of Western England, and took her mother away with her to help her keep house.

Thus left, lonely and uncared for, to drag out a miserable existence, Mary had but one consolation —that of sitting in her old favourite seat, the "Pilgrim's Rest," and gazing at the last token of him she loved, which had reached her a few days before his death. It was a gold chain of Italian workmanship, with a setting of small coins, a larger one forming a pendant. Round the case in which it was sent, was twisted a piece of paper, bearing the following :—

"To the only one who ever loved me—except the mother whose grey hairs I brought in sorrow to the grave—I send this token of my grateful remembrance. Wear it for my sake.

"G. G."

And she does so.

"When I die it will be buried with me," she says softly to herself, as the sun slowly sinks into the far west, and she wends her way back to her lonely home.

* * * * *

Once more the London season is at its height; once more among the beauties who grace the fes-

tivities consequent thereupon, are Lady Sylvestre, her sisters, and the Leslies. Janet, Constance, and Mabel are brides now; Olive is to be married in the autumn, and rumour says that Colonel Delorme, the woman-hater, who has vowed to remain a bachelor all his days, will propose to Phyllis before the season is over. Blithers, the irresistible, has declared privately to a select few in the regiment that he surprised the Colonel one day writing verses on pink tinted paper! but, as Charlie Thornhill astutely remarked, "The chief was no fool, and Blithers told awful crammers!"

However, certain it was, that at every ball, concert, and reception he was always to be found at the second Miss Leslie's side, and she seemed to think him the most agreeable man she ever met.

"But he is so grumpy!" Constance had said once, when her sister was sounding his praises.

"Well, if he is, why—I like grumpy men," Phyllis replied calmly.

The Earl and Countess Sylvestre were giving their second ball of the season at their mansion in South Kensington. All the *elite* of London were present, handsome men and beautiful women,

whose names were among the highest in the land; statesmen, at mention of whom Europe had trembled; ambassadors, foreign princes, famous generals, besides many celebrities in the world of art and letters. Diamonds which would have purchased a king's ransom flashed and sparkled in the lamp-light—gorgeous costumes dazzled the eye. The scent of flowers and perfumes came with intoxicating sweetness to the senses. All was an enchanting scene of gaiety and splendour.

"How beautiful Lady Sylvestre looks to-night," remarked a young Guardsman to his partner in the interval of a waltz, "better even than she did last season, and she was lovely then."

Lady Sybil Geldart smiled sweetly.

"Yes, she is very pretty, and she knows it. There was some scandal about her last season, wasn't there?" innocently.

"I don't know; she looks happy enough over it if there were. When I'm married, my wife shall always wear pale pink satin and diamonds."

"Then you must take care to choose somebody whom the colour will suit," Lady Sybil replied,

with a coquettish glance from her pale blue eyes. Pink was her colour.

"Ha! ha! Lady Sybil, you are too funny, 'pon my word you are! Fancy choosing one's wife to suit a colour! Ha! ha!"

And the Honourable Augustus Danfield showed all his white teeth in a burst of irrepressible laughter.

"I don't see anything funny in it," Lady Sybil replied, rather crossly; "nothing, at any rate, to make you laugh so that every one turns round to look at you," severely.

"I beg your pardon"—the Guardsman's smiles relaxed—"but really, you know, it struck *me* as being remarkably funny."

"There is Captain Macgregor," Lady Sybil began eagerly. "I did not know he was in England."

"Yes, he's been here some time; got a commission in the —th. They're ordered out to the Cape—start directly I believe."

"What a pity!" Lady Sybil said regretfully. "He is so handsome."

"Yes, good-looking fellow. Shall we have another turn?"

Lord and Lady Sylvestre stood together watching the dancers.

"I wonder where Auriol is," Gwendoline remarked, her eyes following the couples as they whirled past. "I have not seen her for some time, and she was looking so tired. I wish you would go and find her, Robert."

"She was dancing with Danvers just now. I'll go and see if you like; but don't you think I shall be rather in the way?" laughing.

Lady Sylvestre seized her husband's arm.

"Robert, you must go *at once* and find her! That dreadful man will propose to her again, and I am so afraid she should have him at last out of sheer weariness of his importunities."

Sylvestre laughed again.

"Why, Gwen! You are not at all a prudent chaperone! Fancy not wanting her to have the 'catch' of the season! What will your mother say to you?"

"I cannot help what she says. You told me yourself that Lord Danvers was not the sort of man to make any girl happy. *Do* go and rescue her, dear."

"Very well; only when your mother scolds you don't lay the blame on *me*. Au revoir."

Handing her back her fan, Lord Sylvestre threaded his way through the ball-room, and was soon lost to sight. Gwendoline sank into a seat near her with a little sigh. She felt sorry for Auriol; the girl did not seem happy, even in the midst of all the gaiety with which she was surrounded. Perhaps the thought of the approaching separation from her twin sister affected her spirits, and made her silent and reserved. Gwendoline could not tell. For some reason Auriol would not confide in her; when asked if she would go anywhere or join in any festivity, the answer always was, "Yes, if you like; I don't mind about it;" beyond that no further interest could be elicited.

"Lady Sylvestre, this is our dance, I think."

Gwendoline looked quickly up, to find Bertie Macgregor standing before her.

"I have been looking for you everywhere, and thought you had forgotten me; then I met your husband, and he told me where you were."

"And I thought the same of *you*," she said,

laughing. They were friends now, these two who *had* been lovers.

Bertie was surprised to find how calmly he could look at her and think of her now.

"Robert has gone to find Auriol," Lady Sylvestre said, as she rose and took her partner's arm.

"She is in the conservatory with Danvers. I very unfortunately intruded at a most inopportune moment; he was on his knees I think, and pouring forth"—

"He is making her another offer, and she has refused him twice; oh, Captain Macgregor, *do* go and stop him!" entreatingly.

Macgregor looked surprised.

"My dear Lady Sylvestre, excuse me. I"—

"Oh, don't refuse! You *must* go. Say I sent you to fetch her."

"But she won't thank me for"—

"Yes, yes she will. Only do as I ask you; she *hates* him, but I know if he worries her into it, she will accept him."

"Doesn't she like him then?" Bertie said slowly.

"No, she cannot bear him; but mamma wants her to marry him; and she is so gentle and pitying; if he works upon her feelings I am so afraid she will have him; won't you go?"

"Certainly, Lady Sylvestre, if you wish it; but what about our dance?"

"Never mind that; dance with Auriol instead, and if you really wish for one later on, I will keep one for you."

Gwendoline watched her second emissary depart with feelings of relief.

"They *must* rescue her between them," she thought to herself with a smile.

Auriol Mervyn stood in the dimly lighted conservatory, listening with averted face to the passionate pleadings of the man whom she had already twice refused; yet who cared for *her* enough to come even a third time to tell his tale of love.

"Why cannot you be my wife?" he persisted, in tones which he strove in vain to steady; "you might make a better man of me if you would only take me in hand."

"I cannot," came the low spoken reply.

"Why not?"

He looked at her as she stood before him, her white satin dress with its gold embroidery gleaming in the half light of the shaded lamps. Pearls were on the white neck and arms; she looked like Undine he thought, so fair and *spirituelle*. And she would not be his wife! it was so hard that with everything this earth could give him, the one thing which he would have sold his soul for was denied him. He set his teeth hard in his grief and disappointment. His self-love too was wounded. He had always had an idea that he "came, saw, and conquered," for women had flattered him, because of his title and wealth, and he might have been caught by some match-making mother long ago, but for his selfish love of bachelor freedom. And now when he really loved for the first time in his life a girl without money, and of inferior birth to himself, lo, and behold she refused him! And refused him not only once but each and every time he pleaded his suit.

"Why not?" he repeated, as she did not answer.

Auriol pulled a gardenia out of her bouquet, and began to pull it petal by petal to pieces.

"Because I do not love you, and never shall," she replied gently.

"Are you *quite* sure; don't you think in time"—

"I am quite sure."

"Auriol, you have broken my heart," he said.

"I think not. Hearts are not so easily broken."

"But I shall not take your refusal. I shall wait and wait, till I *make* you care for me."

Auriol turned and looked at him steadily.

"Spare yourself the trouble," she said firmly, "for I shall *never* do so, *never*. I—"

"Miss Mervyn, excuse me, but your sister sent me to find you; she wishes to speak to you."

The calm, courteous tones of Captain Macgregor made Auriol and her companion start. Lord Danvers, with a muttered something about "the next dance," turned and left the conservatory, and Bertie held out his arm to escort Auriol back to the ball-room.

"Stay a moment. I am faint—ill—the heat has"—

She turned a white face towards him, then swayed, and would have fallen, but for his arm hastily thrown around her.

"I will try not to faint," she said, with a smile. "I shall be all right directly. I have been dancing too much. I will sit down here a minute. You won't tell Gwendoline?" laying an entreating hand upon his arm as he led her to a settee and took a seat beside her.

"Are you better? Shall I get you anything? A glass of wine?"

"I—I should like some water; but don't say I am ill."

"Certainly not. I shall be back in a moment."

He hurried away, and presently returned with a glass of water. When she had taken a few sips he possessed himself of her fan, and gently waved it backwards and forwards. Never, perhaps, had Auriol looked more like Lady Sylvestre than she did to-night. Bertie could almost fancy himself back again at Venice, on the moonlit balcony, side by side with her he had so fondly loved. Auriol's white satin dress, with its quaint old-fashioned make and heavy fringe, made her look like Juliet. Bertie could not help feeling that he would have had no objection to be Romeo.

"Do not stay with me unless you like," she

said suddenly, looking up at him. "Are you not dancing?"

"I was engaged to Lady Sylvestre, but she sent me to find you instead, and said she would rather I danced with you," he replied, smiling at her.

"But now that you have found me don't you think you had better go back?"

"Certainly not. I am going to talk to you till you are quite recovered, and then, if you like, we will go back to the ball-room; if not, we will stay here."

"But your partners?" Auriol opened her eyes.

"My partner for the next dance is, if I mistake not, Miss Auriol Mervyn," he said, amusedly.

Auriol coloured, and looked at her ball card.

"Dear me, how stupid of me! But, of course, I should have known before the dance came."

"I doubt it. Some more fortunate fellow would have snapped you up, and I should have been nowhere," laughing.

Auriol did not answer. She looked vexed.

"What is the matter?" he asked, bending his head to look at her. "What have I said?"

"Nothing."

Then as she met the laughing glance of his blue eyes, she laughed too.

"That is right. Your face is made for smiles," he said.

There was silence. Auriol's work of destruction in her bouquet went slowly on. Bertie's eyes were fixed on her face as he gently waved the large white satin fan to and fro.

"I suppose I ought to congratulate you, Miss Mervyn," he said at length.

Auriol let the rosebud in her hand fall to the ground.

"Congratulate me; Why?"

"On your engagement to Lord Danvers."

"I am not engaged to him."

"Oh, I thought you were."

Macgregor stooped and picked up the rosebud at her feet; then, taking out the "button-hole" which adorned his coat, he pinned the former in its place.

"It doesn't look nice at all by itself; let me put something with it," Auriol said, as she watched the operation.

"Will you really?"

He handed her back the rosebud, and looked on with interest while she searched in her bouquet for a spray of maidenhair fern, and one or two lilies of the valley.

"Put some forget-me-nots too," he said, gently.

She took out some pieces, and arranged them round the rosebud; he noticed that her fingers trembled a little.

"I shall take them as a sign that you will think of me sometimes when I am far away. We start next week, you know."

"Yes."

She fastened the flowers together, then handed the little bouquet to him.

"It looks quite like a bought one, doesn't it?" she said, with a little laugh, that had yet a suspicion of tears in it.

"Will you put it in for me?"

She leaned towards him, and did as he asked, but her hands trembled so she could scarcely complete the task, which to *her* was all too sweet.

"It looks very nice," she said, drawing back and surveying with a critical air the effect.

"Miss Mervyn, do you remember the day I first met you?" he asked, abruptly.

"Yes," she answered, "the day we caught the rabbit. How along ago it seems!" with a sigh.

"It does indeed, Auriol; when I saw you that day, the first seed was sown in my heart of a love which has made the misery of my life."

It was a strange speech. Auriol looked bewildered. He went on.

"Then I saw your sister Gwendoline—and—I loved her."

Another pause. Auriol sat pale and silent.

"That love lasted through all the trouble which came upon me, and though I knew it was wrong and hopeless, yet I could not banish it from my life—till a day came, when I found that my selfishness was breaking another heart besides my own, then I tore the love from my heart—I fought the battle with myself—and conquered."

He looked at his companion—she still sat silent.

"For some time now, the face of her who first sowed the seeds of love in my heart, which another fostered into maturity, has come between me and the thought of my future dreary existence.

Auriol, I don't know what has made me tell you all this. I cannot expect that you should care to marry anyone whose wooing is so strange and unnatural. I am going away, perhaps for years, but if, when I come back (if I ever do), you are still free, will you let me try to win your love?"

He spoke anxiously, eagerly. Auriol looked at him for a moment, her eyes swimming in tears; then she said, so low that he had to bend his head to hear the words—

"Love me, if you can. I—have loved you all along."

* * * * * *

And Mrs. Mervyn still sticks to her text, that of the four daughters, whose future she had striven to make so brilliant and prosperous, Gwendoline is the only one who has not grievously disappointed her.

THE END.

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